

IDIC

IDIC LOG 9



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RETURN TO THE FOLD

by

Jean Sloan

(Events in this story take place immediately after THE VOYAGE HOME.)

James T. Kirk relaxed in his self-moulding chair, cradling a brandy glass in his hands. He felt at peace with the world: life had taken on a rosy hue. He thought of another birthday - it seemed like eons ago - when McCoy had given him a pair of spectacles, reinforcing his feeling of age.

At that time he had lost himself, his purpose in life. He had been in dry dock, the Enterprise no longer his. The vessel's fortunes had also declined. She had become a training ship, a shadow of her former greatness. He had felt then that life could get no worse, but it had: he had lost his best friend and his son; the Enterprise had been destroyed by his own hand. At least, though, her destruction had been on the battlefield, not the slow dismemberment in dock which would have been her lot at the end of the training missions.

He sighed. What goddess watched over him to allow him another lease of life? He had thrown away his career without regret in the hope - and what an impossibility it had seemed! - of saving McCoy and Spock: his career had been restored to him along with the friend he loved so well. Fate had been kind...

The door chime interrupted his reverie.

"Come."

The word activated the voice release and the door opened to reveal McCoy and Scotty, carrying a heavy looking parcel.

"Happy birthday, *Captain* Kirk!" they chorused, emphasising the 'Captain'.

Kirk looked at the parcel curiously.

"It's a crate," said McCoy in explanation.

"There's some Scotch," added Scotty.

"And some *very* old Saurian brandy," grinned McCoy.

"And that green stuff I found in that little back street on Wrigley's," reminisced Scotty.

"Not to mention everything necessary to make a Mint Julep," continued McCoy.

"No-one likes Mint Juleps," smiled Kirk.

"But I do, Jim-boy," replied the Doctor in his best Georgia accent, removing the wrapping from the crate and looking

appreciatively at the bottles and flagons lined up inside it. "Get some glasses, Jim."

Kirk pointed to the table, which had disappeared under a mountain of food and the requested glasses. There was also a large bowl of orange liquid with bits of fruit floating in it.

"What's this?" queried the Doctor with interest.

"That's a fruit cup specially created for our Vulcan friend."

McCoy sniffed it. "Needs a little something," he said, fetching a squat brown bottle from the crate and tipping in half the contents. "Bit of rum - perhaps it'll help unstiffen that Vulcan. He's definitely not the Spock we used to know."

Kirk made no comment. Spock was more formal, more as he had been when Kirk first joined the Enterprise, but he was just glad to have Spock back, and their erstwhile rapport was slowly reawakening, or being reforged - he was not sure which.

The buzzer sounded again, heralding the arrival of Uhura, Sulu and Chekov, all bearing gifts. Scotty, the self-appointed barman, organised drinks and the conversation turned to speculation about Starfleet's plans for the group.

"They'll give us a freighter," opined Sulu gloomily.

"Nay, laddie," said Scott, smiling. "They'll probably put us in the garbage service."

Kirk raised his hands in supplication. "Gentlemen, Nyota, since you've raised the subject, I have something to say. You are all long overdue for promotion. Sulu, Scotty, you should have ships of your own. Nyota, you have been offered promotion on Communications Central. It is... not in your best interests to accept posting with me..." His voice tailed off, unsure how to continue.

Uhura and Sulu exchanged glances. It was Chekov, though, who spoke first, his Russian accent strengthened by emotion.

"Keptin, ve haff already discussed zis. Ve vish to continue in service with you."

"Captain, it does seem that our lives are inextricably bound together. We must bow to the logic of the situation."

The voice came from the doorway, and everyone turned to look at the speaker.

"Well said, Mr. Spock," beamed Scotty as the Vulcan stepped into the room.

Spock inclined his head, and crossed to where Kirk stood looking at him in surprise.

"Spock, how did you get in?"

The Vulcan looked puzzled for a moment. "I believe I knew the door code, Captain. I must have remembered it." The quirk of his eyebrow made them all laugh.

"C'mon, Spock, have some fruit cup." McCoy proffered a full glass.

Spock took it somewhat suspiciously as Scotty raised his glass to the Captain.

"A toast. May the wind be at our backs, and may we meet no ion storms. To Captain Kirk - happy birthday."

The words echoed round the room. McCoy watched Spock covertly as the Vulcan took a sip of his drink. Spock, catching his eye, spoke quietly. "A good fruit cup, Doctor. Even the ethanol is acceptable in a small quantity." Leaving the Doctor open-mouthed, he walked over to Kirk as the others turned their attention to the food.

"Captain..."

"Jim, Spock, Jim. We aren't on duty now."

"Happy birthday, Jim." He proffered a tiny package.

Kirk opened it gently. Inside was a perfect Vulcan crystal containing a tiny silver model of the Enterprise as she had been before Genesis, her hull polished and gleaming, perfect in every detail. Kirk turned the crystal in his hands, then he looked at the Vulcan, his eyes shining.

"It is a Vulcan memory crystal, Jim. In it I have placed some memorable extracts from the log of the five-year mission. If you wish I will show you how to retrieve the recording later."

"I would like that, Spock. And sincerest thanks. It's quite beautiful. How did you know - remember - what to select?"

"I spent some time studying the Enterprise logs to complete my retraining while we were awaiting trial."

"Did it help?" Kirk had become serious. He had been aware that Spock had frequently been at a loss during their last mission when one or other of the crew had referred to a past incident which he had shared in but did not recall. The failing had irritated the Vulcan. Not, of course, that Spock would admit to irritation.

"It helped greatly, Jim."

Further conversation was interrupted by McCoy coming to refill Spock's glass.

"C'mon, sobersides. Get that down you and have some more," he said, indicating Spock's barely touched drink.

Spock gave him what was intended to be a withering look, but McCoy was far too merry to notice. He bore Jim off to try "... a new kind of Mint Julep made with the green stuff from Wrigley's."

The Vulcan picked up his glass and sipped cautiously; it was fairly palatable, though he suspected that the removal of the alcohol would greatly improve the flavour. Jim Kirk drifted back over to him, now armed with something very green in a tall glass. Seeing Spock regarding the neon drink with disfavour, he grinned.

"Tastes worse than it looks. I'm going to lose it in a

moment. Do you want me to dispose of yours, too?"

"You didn't make the punch, Jim?"

"I did, but Bones added the rum when he arrived."

Relieved that he would not offend his Captain by rejecting the drink, Spock handed over the glass with alacrity. Kirk tipped the contents of both glasses into the pot of a large fronded plant standing near the window, set the empty glasses on the table, and sat down next to Spock.

"What you said when you arrived, Spock - does that mean you're coming back as First Officer with me on whatever vessel we are given?"

"I don't know, Captain."

Kirk's face fell, clearly registering disappointment, and the Vulcan became conscious of a warm feeling as he realised that he was wanted. He stored the feeling to be analysed in meditation.

"No, Captain, you misunderstand. I want to be posted as your First Officer, but I have not had confirmation from Starfleet that my commission has been renewed. The reason that I have not been in contact with you in the three weeks since the trial is that I had to take a series of tests to satisfy Starfleet that my integrity as an officer in the fleet has not been damaged by my... experiences. They also wish to satisfy themselves as to my mental health."

"But why didn't you tell me?" exclaimed Kirk, outraged. "McCoy could have cleared you on all counts."

"I am afraid that the good Doctor's word was not trusted as impartial, given his involvement with the circumstances of my case. I retain a strong impression that the Board who dealt with me were rather sceptical about what they called 'Vulcan mysticism'."

"But they couldn't deny that you are alive, Spock. Didn't that help them to believe?"

"Look at it from their point of view, Jim. They could easily accept that I was regenerated on Genesis - there is scientific proof of that - cause and effect. But how could they know that my mind was my own? Perhaps I had been re-educated by, for instance, the Klingons."

"That's ridiculous! They..."

"Jim, they were able to detect many gaps in my memory. There were questions I could not answer."

"But surely that bears out our story? The Klingons would hardly leave you with suspicious memory gaps. So what exactly is the situation? You're waiting to be told whether they'll permit your Starfleet commission to be reactivated? It's nonsense! I'll get in touch with Nogura."

"Jim." Spock's gentle tone halted the tirade Kirk was about to launch. "Starfleet do not exactly credit you as objective in this case. Though they are very grateful to you for saving the world, they do not forget that you stole the Enterprise to save me."

The Vulcan looked embarrassed, and Jim Kirk laughed, his anger dissipated.

"All right, my Vulcan friend, I won't fuss - for now. But by god, if they turn you down they'll hear me shouting from here to Nimbus III. C'mon, let's get something to eat," he added, his good humour restored.

In the early hours of the morning Jim Kirk was alone again, staring out of the window at San Francisco Bay spread out before him, delineated by twinkling lights. Spock had left first, when he could stand drunken Human emotionalism no longer. Then one by one the others had departed, McCoy and Scotty helping each other home.

He sighed, overwhelmed by a feeling of loneliness, his optimistic mood of the early evening gone, his heart heavy. The new ship would not be the Enterprise - things would never be as they had been. He had been changed by his experiences, and he felt keenly the loss of David. He had tried to contact Carol Marcus, but she had refused his calls. He had sought out Gillian, but she was enraptured by her new Cetacean Institute, and had no time for relationships.

It seemed to him that in the end he was always alone. Time and again he had lost people he cared about. The list was frightening - Sam, Gary, Edith, Miramanee, Carol, Spock - many others. However, Spock had been given back to him - but with a sinking feeling he remembered Spock's words earlier in the evening. In the warm glow of the firelight, among friends, it had seemed impossible that Starfleet's objections to Spock could be anything more than bureaucratic hiccups; but now, in the early hours of a chilly morning, the threat over Spock's future seemed more real. The Vulcan was not as close to him as he had been before Genesis, but he knew that without Spock his new ship would never be home.

Suddenly he became aware that the door chime was sounding. He frowned, wondering who it could be, and activated the intercom.

"Spock here, Captain. May I come in?"

"Spock, what's wrong?" asked Kirk worriedly as the Vulcan entered the room.

"Nothing. When I returned to the Vulcan Embassy there was a message for me confirming the reactivation of my commission in Starfleet, as long as I agree to regular psycho-simulator tests. I thought you might like to know."

Kirk felt a great wave of relief. "So you came along to make sure I didn't bawl out Nogura tomorrow morning, eh?"

The Vulcan looked awkward. "Not exactly. I wanted to ask you something, Captain. I had not intended to call tonight, but I went for a walk before retiring and as I passed this apartment block I could see your lights were still on. I thought the party was still in progress. I am sorry that I have disturbed your privacy. The matter can wait until morning."

To Kirk's practised eye Spock looked acutely uncomfortable; he obviously had something important on his mind.

"You haven't disturbed me at all, Spock. I was just reminiscing."

The serious look on Kirk's face told Spock that Kirk's thoughts had been solemn ones. He looked at the Human in front of him, aware that there was much about him that he had forgotten, and aware too of what a great debt he owed the Captain. He had come to pay part of that debt now.

"Captain, I am very grateful that you were prepared to fight to get me back at your side in my former capacity, but it may be that you would be better with another officer. On Earth, during our recent mission, my lack of empathy with Humans caused a number of problems. I have relearned factual information, but I cannot relearn empathic response, except by experience. That will take a long time. I have been watching the transcripts of the five year mission, and it is obvious that my ability to empathise, particularly with you, was a factor in developing solutions. As I am now, I must be less than efficient to you."

Kirk sat thunderstruck. Then he gulped and said dazedly, "Are you saying you don't want to serve with me?"

"Captain, I am asking you to consider carefully something that I do not believe has occurred to you."

"Spock, earlier this evening you said that you wanted to be my First Officer. Did you mean it?"

"Yes, Captain. But we must be logical..."

"Damn logic! We'll sort out any difficulties as they arise. Personally, I don't foresee any. You are growing more like yourself every day - if you see what I mean."

"Captain - Jim - please take some time to consider. I repeat, I do not think you have considered this matter carefully enough."

James Kirk looked at Spock in exasperation. He could not understand the contradiction in Spock's words. The Vulcan said he did want to serve with Kirk, but seemed to be trying to persuade the Captain to refuse the appointment. With sudden insight, he realised that Spock was afraid of something.

"Spock, you're being illogical. What's wrong? You could have left this until morning, yet it was urgent for you." He sat down, watching his friend carefully.

"Jim, I mean what I say. I am afraid that your... affection... for me is blinding you to what I am. I am incomplete. I am not fully the Spock you knew."

"I accept you on those terms, my friend."

Spock looked at the Human and saw the compassion in his eyes. He drew a deep breath and spoke very quietly. "Jim, I am afraid of letting you down after you have given up everything for me." He lowered his gaze.

Kirk stood up, went to Spock, and placed his hands firmly on the Vulcan's shoulders. "Spock, look at me. I mean this. I would do it again, all of it, to get you back. I do not and never have expected you to be perfect. You are your own harshest critic. I

need you with me. If you want to be my First Officer, as you said, then be my First Officer - and my friend. I don't want to lose you again." He tightened his grip. "What do you say?"

The Vulcan met his gaze then. "It seems, Captain, that I must bow to the logic of the situation. I say yes."

To his surprise Spock of Vulcan found himself being hugged by the Human. And to his even greater surprise, he found himself returning the embrace. It was something else to be stored for meditation.



A FATHER'S THOUGHTS

My sons,
I look at you and see your happiness,
The love and contentment
You have found with each other.
For so long have you both sought,
For that which you now have,
And which you each found in the other.
To those who know you,
And know what to look for,
The feelings you have for each other
Shine forth for all to see.

Since the day of your bonding,
You have both been more at peace with yourselves,
More content with life,
Than ever before.
For now you know that
Never again will either of you be lonely,
And never will you need to search for love.
For when death comes,
it will come to both,
And you will be together,
For all Eternity.

Christine J. Jones

After reading:
"With Hoops of Steel" &
"Closer Than a Brother"
by Meg Wright.



THE END OF FOREVER

Epsilon rode to where the winds met,
 where spirits were tossed within its whispering breath,
 held from age as they were held from life,
 held from youth as they were held from death.

Valitoon, the steed upon which he rode,
 a restless beast of flaming fire and bitter snow,
 winged as the birds of the dawning sun,
 a silhouette surrounded by a fiery glow.

Epsilon remembered the words given into his trust,
 as he approached his journey's end,
 came to where all futures meet all possible pasts,
 where nothing is unchangeable, and where each man
 may find a friend.

He entered into the maelstrom of echoing time,
 of swirling faces seen, and faces yet to see,
 and reached the eye, in which all was calm,
 of a place that has been, yet can never truly be.

He approached the gateway, the appointed place,
 glowing with reflections from mirrors scattered through
 history's realm,
 spoke the words as he had been bidden,
 before the seductive visions had time to overwhelm.

"I have come from the creators of all things,
 to thee, their servant and watchful sentinel,
 you, who stand, still the Guardian of Forever,
 where all those others entrusted before you fell.

They command thee to rest easy now,
 to close thy doorway until the day,
 another's voice will ask thee a question,
 another's dreams shall guide your way."

And the gateway's glow grew dimmer,
 and the air grew a peace unknown before,
 at the Guardian's last flickering glimmer,
 as the door to time was closed once more.

And so Epsilon mounted his steed, Valitoon,
 and with swift grace rode once more through night and on,
 and left the Guardian, silent and lonely,
 waiting, through eternity waiting,
 waiting for a question.

Katy Deery.



TIME FOR CHANGES

by

Helen Cakebread

The great white ship hung motionless in space. It was dying. Inside, people were rushing to the shuttle bays to abandon ship. Over the speakers came, "RED ALERT. This is no drill. All hands ABANDON ship," repeating over and over.

On the bridge Captain James Kirk stood, knowing his beloved Enterprise was lost. Another explosion sounded. The ship shuddered; it was like a giant hand around the ship trying to break it up.

Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Mr Spock, what are our chances on the planet if we can land?" he asked.

"Not good, Captain, but it will sustain life and a beacon has been sent for aid," replied Spock.

Another explosion, this time nearer to them; the Enterprise swayed. Kirk lost his balance.

Kirk shouted, "Clear the bridge! Save yourselves!"

The ship shook again and the bridge started to break up. Kirk looked at Spock.

"No one to help us this time, my friend," he said.

The explosion came again. Kirk was picked up and thrown across the room like a rag doll, to lie by a broken rail.

Spock came around; he sat up and managed to open his one good eye to see green blood running down his arm and body. He tried to stand. Pain lashed through him. Where was Kirk? He turned, then cried out.

Spock pulled himself up and somehow reached Kirk. He brushed the dust away from his face. Blood ran down from a deep cut on his forehead, but that was not all; blood was all over his body.

"I will not leave you like this," whispered Spock.

Spock picked Kirk up and carried him away from the bridge. At last he reached his goal. He never noticed the crew crying for help - there was nothing he could do now. Spock's only thoughts were of Kirk. He carefully laid him in a torpedo tube and sealed the lid.

Kirk had always wanted to die in space with his stars. He would not be happy anywhere else. Spock pressed the button; the door opened and the tube sped out into space.

"Live long..." He got no further as pain lashed through him and bought him to his knees. As blackness came over him he whispered, "Goodbye, my friend." He lay down on the deck as the tube sped away from it all...

"Captain," said Sulu, "an object just came into sensor range."

"On screen." The Captain looked at it. "What is it?" he asked.

Mr. Telon, the temporary First Officer, turned from the science station. "It is a torpedo tube with faint life readings," he said.

"Put a tractor beam on it and bring it in. Have security guards and Dr. McCoy standing by," ordered the Captain.

The Captain entered the hangar deck as they lifted the lid off the tube; he heard McCoy gasp.

"He's alive... just," said McCoy.

The Captain looked into the tube. His face showed surprise, then he masked it.

"Get him to sickbay and take off his uniform. You will not speak of this to anyone. Keep me informed," said Spock.

James Kirk came around. He was lying in a bed. He felt as if he was floating. This could not be happening. His last memory was of standing on the bridge, then nothing. Maybe he was dreaming.

"How do you feel?"

Kirk thought, *That's Bones*. He opened his eyes slowly to see a pair of blue eyes looking at him.

"How do you feel? I'm Dr. McCoy - you've been ill for some time."

Kirk stared at him. His name was the same, but this was not his friend Bones. The Doctor helped him to sit up and gave him a glass of water to drink. At least he could move his tongue and find out where he was.

"Where am I? And where are the others?" Kirk asked.

"There were no others - we only found you, just in time to revive you. You are on the USS Enterprise."

Three weeks later Kirk sat in sickbay not quite knowing what to do. Dr. McCoy had said he was fit, but to do what? He did not belong here. *Why, Spock?* Kirk thought. *Why did you leave me to this? To be alone?*

The door opened and the Doctor came in carrying a blue tunic top which he handed to Kirk. "Please put this on. You are going to see the Captain."

As Kirk put on the top he saw two security guards waiting for him. They escorted him to the Captain's quarters. One of them pressed the buzzer. The door opened and Kirk walked in, the door shutting behind him. Kirk knew the face before the man at the desk

looked up, but he also knew that this was not his friend.

"Please sit down," said Spock, looking at him.

Kirk sat. It seemed strange to be sitting on the other side of the desk. Spock looked at the report from the Doctor. It said the man in front of him was fit.

"I want you to think about this before giving me answers," said Spock. "I will take you to Starbase One for inquiries to try and find where you came from, and to see what other work you can do."

Spock paused for a while to let it sink in. "Or, you could take over the job of my First Officer, who was killed, but looked like you and had the same name."

Kirk first thought, *I want to go back to my own world.* But if he did manage it, there would be nothing there for him - his ship was gone, and if he went to this Starbase what would he become? A freak, to be examined and asked questions - he'd never be in space again. But could he take over a dead man's shoes? How had that man died? So many questions.

"I agree to be your First Officer, but how did *he* die?" asked Kirk.

"Mr. Kirk's party beamed down to a planet called Astra Five. It was unknown to us and our sensors said it was safe. While they were collecting samples there was an earthquake. It was only through Mr. Kirk's actions that all hands were saved, but he was hit by many rocks. He was put on life-support, but the day we found you he died."

"Won't the crew think it odd if I suddenly appear alive?" asked Kirk.

"No," replied Spock, "as they did not know he had died. I put it out that he - you - had a head injury. He did... as well as many other injuries. That is why you were confined to sickbay."

"What about the security guards?" asked Kirk.

"They are loyal to me, but I have also given them a mind block. Only the Doctor and myself know the truth," said Spock.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Kirk.

"Go to your quarters. There you will find a pile of tapes about us. When I think it is time, I will call you. I must make it clear that I am the Captain and will be obeyed." He hesitated. "What was your rank, and what happened to your ship?"

"Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise, and I do not know what happened - I only wish I did," said Kirk, pulling himself up with pride.

Spock watched him straighten up when he said 'Captain'. Being a Vulcan, he had an enquiring mind, enough to wonder who Kirk's First Officer had been, and did he have much trouble. He had to know - could it have been...?

"Who was your First Officer?" asked Spock.

Kirk smiled. His whole face lit up that it shook Spock to his roots. There was so much warmth that it was like the sun coming out.

"My First Officer, who was also my friend, was a Vulcan like you, and had the same name, Spock. He must have thought I was dead, and laid me in the tube so I could be with my stars."

With that, he turned away from Spock and left.

James T. Kirk, Personal Log, Stardate Unknown.

For three days I have stayed in my quarters, waiting for the Captain to call me. In the meanwhile I have read all the tapes about him, the crew and the United Federation of Planets. It seems that here we are on friendly terms with the Klingons, who have helped us in past wars. How I will react when meeting a Klingon I do not know.

It seems that not only our names are the same, but the rest of the crew too, only some have a different rank.

I came across the late James T. Kirk's log. My brother is still alive here, but it does not say where. That seems odd, as if it was blanked out.

It also says that he liked the Captain, and they were becoming friends, but it was very hard to trust Vulcans as they read your mind and had little feeling for others. Maybe that's why they make good Captains?

He had only known him about two years. Little did he know that if he took the trouble to see beneath that wall, he would see a lonely man inside. It took me years to pull my Spock out of his shell, but what rewards I got. Maybe this Spock is no different? I will have to wait and see, but at the same time, do I want a friendship just after losing one? Could I bear it a second time?

Why did you leave me, Spock? Kirk thought. Sadness washed over him as he remembered the good times.

"Mr. Kirk, please report to the bridge. This is Captain Spock."

"On my way, sir. Kirk out." Kirk shut his log down, straightened up, opened the door and marched out to his fate.

The lift doors opened onto the bridge. As Kirk stepped out, he saw on the screen a brown planet which they were orbiting. The Captain turned and pointed for him to stand by his chair.

"This planet is called Alpha Nine. We hold the mining rights, but now and then the Alphans do trade with others, which we allow. They have their reasons. This time a ship has come making demands. We will beam down to see what their intention is," said Spock softly.

"Mr. Dale is standing by," said Sulu.

Spock stood up. "Come, Mr. Kirk. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Tell Mr. Dale we're beaming down."

When they arrived, a little man met them. He had a long brown robe tied round the middle with a piece of string, and he was smiling.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Spock." He saw the look on Kirk's face. "We met a long time ago."

"This is my First Officer, Mr. Kirk," replied Spock.

"Please come this way," said Dale as he nodded a greeting. He led them into a small room with an old wooden table and chairs. He saw the surprise on their faces, and he smiled again.

"I like to play games. It's nice to go back to the simple life. Come." He opened a door. Inside the room was thick golden carpet, lavish seating, tables and chairs.

"I can have anything I wish. Now you see why I play my games," said Dale. "A few days ago, a ship arrived to do the normal trading. Then afterwards they said they wanted more or they would attack the planet."

"What do you trade for? You say that you have everything?" asked Kirk.

"That is correct, Mr. Kirk, but we need outsiders to mine and look after our homes. You see, we do not have families of our own. We took the choice when we came here to live as... You would call us monks," said Dale.

"You mean you need slaves," said Kirk in disgust.

Spock stepped in before Kirk said anything that would offend Dale.

"Could we see who it is?" asked Spock.

The screen flickered to show a ship, then a bridge and a man who had a thin face with a scar running down part of his face. He had long black hair and grey eyes; he even had white teeth. He had on a blue top with a black band going across it.

"To whom am I speaking?" said the man.

"I am Captain Spock of the USS Enterprise."

"In that case, I am Captain Reynard." He laughed then carried on. "Do you like the name? I got it out of old tapes we found on the last planet we... visited. I fancy being known as The Fox." With that he started to laugh again.

"What do you want?" asked Spock.

The man stopped laughing. "We bring many people here and we get very little back for the trouble. For such a rich planet it will cost more in future, or no ships will come here ever again."

The screen went blank. Spock turned to Dale.

"If you do as he says, it will not end there. He will want more each time."

Dale nodded. "I know this, but without them to bring in men, we cannot mine."

"Why do you buy men and not families? Then you could have people all the time," asked Kirk.

"Mr. Kirk, you are correct, but this planet would not be the right place for them. Many people go mad with all the gold and gems we mine here, since there is nowhere to spend them. We give them all they need; they never want for anything."

"Put the screen on, I have an idea," said Kirk. "If I may?" he said, looking at Spock. Spock nodded.

The screen came on where Reynard stood waiting. "What is your answer?" he said.

"I am James T. Kirk. Mr. Dale has agreed to what you say." Reynard smiled, but his smile faded as Kirk carried on.

"As a sign of good faith, you will leave some of your men to work in the mines so that you can have as many gems as they can find, but you should know that when you leave you cannot return for ten years. A force field will be put around the planet, and only when we return will it be lifted so we can collect our trade goods. Mr. Dale has told me that they just want to live a simple life, so the ten-year hiatus in trade will not trouble them. You may get ready to beam the men down."

Reynard looked with hate at Kirk. "I will not forget this - we'll meet again. You win this time." The screen went blank.

"The ship has gone," said Dale.

"I do not understand," said Spock. "There is no force field."

Kirk smiled. "But he does not know that. What he does know is that if he tried to send any of his men down under those conditions, they would end up killing him."

"You have saved us. We all thank you," said Dale.

As they walked back into the other room, Dale came up to them. "Please take these gifts," he said.

Spock was handed a box. He took off the lid. Inside lay two gold goblets with scroll writing on them and patterns from old Vulcan. "Thank you," said Spock.

Kirk was given a small flat box. He also lifted the lid. Lying on a blue cloth was an IDIC medal like the one he had lost - the IDIC which Spock had given him when they became friends. Kirk felt the blood drain from his face and his head swimming as he thought, *Why did you leave me?*

Spock saw Kirk swaying, grabbed hold of his arms and sat him down. As he touched him, great sadness ran over Spock. Kirk looked up at him. "My Spock gave me one of these when we became friends."

Kirk felt the tears running down his face. He mourned the loss of his friend and brother.

"I'm sorry, I did not know it would cause you pain. I saw it in your mind that you'd lost a medal like this. I'll be more careful in future. Goodbye," said Dale.

"Spock to Enterprise, ready to beam up," said Spock.

Captain's log. Mr. Kirk has settled in well. No one has noticed anything different about him. He seems to have recovered from the shock of getting the medal. I wonder what kind of person this Spock was to win so much thought? I hope in time we might become friends too, so that I have someone to trust and talk to. I did try with the late Jim Kirk, but when he found out about mind melds, he would not be alone with me. I tried to tell him I would not enter his mind without permission, but he thought otherwise. I would never do this, unless it was permitted. Sometimes I get lonely too.

The Enterprise was star-mapping when the storm hit them without warning. The ship bucked as if trying to dislodge an invisible rider. It seemed to last for ages, but a few minutes later it was all over.

The Captain watched as all decks reported damage and injury to Mr. Kirk, his First Officer. As Kirk turned to tell Spock, the red light shone. They both looked at the screen. Kirk could not believe his eyes as he whispered, "Enterprise..."

The great ship hung in space. It looked undamaged, but he could see it was quite lifeless.

"Mr. Kirk, I will see you in my quarters," said Spock. His tone was harsh to try and break the spell that Kirk was under.

"Yes, sir," replied Kirk, tearing his eyes away from the screen.

"Lt. Uhura, take over. Hold this position," ordered Spock.

"What are you going to do?" asked Kirk when they finally reached Spock's quarters.

"There must have been a strong storm which pushed - I assume it to be your ship - through to our side. You cannot go back, and there is no life on board, but we could still go over and have a look if that is what you want, then we will see," said Spock.

"Thank you. It would ease my mind," replied Kirk.

Spock touched his console. "Lieutenant, we will be going over to the ship. Have suits ready for four people. Captain out."

The transporter beamed them over to the fourth deck.

"Mr. Kirk, you will stay here while Security check it out." Spock knew he had to stop Kirk from dashing away to search the lifeless ship.

When Security came back, it was with a negative report. "We can't get to the bridge. It is badly damaged," said Jenkins.

"There is nothing here. When Barrow comes back we will return. I am sorry, Kirk," Spock murmured.

Mr. Barrow came up to them. "I found this, sir." He opened his hand. On it lay an IDIC medal. "It was jammed into a tight corner."

Kirk grabbed it out of his hand and held it close to him.

"Spock to Enterprise, ready to beam back."

As they arrived back, McCoy was waiting for them. They took off their suits and Spock could see Kirk crying.

"Doctor, please take Mr. Kirk to sickbay. I will be on the bridge," said Spock.

Kirk stood still, trying to understand it all. McCoy started to pull his arm. Kirk shook him off. Maybe his Spock had thought he was dead and that he was doing the right thing to send him out in space. But he was alive... and there was no going back. He might never be Captain again, but he was with his friends, even in another time. He owed this Captain as much as the old Enterprise. He smiled at McCoy and walked up to the bridge and his Enterprise.

Spock showed surprise when he saw Kirk. The Human stepped down to him.

"Please..." Kirk did not have to say any more. Spock knew.

"Torpedoes two and three, stand by," said Spock. He looked at Kirk, who nodded.

"Fire." Both torpedoes hit the ship and the Enterprise was gone.

"Thank you... from all of them," said Kirk softly.

James T. Kirk, Personal Log

At last I feel I belong here. Spock has left me in charge a lot, maybe to ease the hurt I feel, but lately I sense that there is something wrong with him. He only sends his orders through the console and rarely comes up. I know Captains have a lot of paperwork, but this is very odd.

Kirk sat in the chair on the bridge thinking about Spock. Could it be Pon Farr? "Mr. Sulu, will you take over? I will be in sickbay," said Kirk.

Kirk left the bridge. His first thought was to ask Spock himself. But no, he would go and see McCoy. He would know more about this Spock than Kirk himself did.

As Kirk entered, he saw McCoy bending over his desk in despair and rubbing his eyes.

"McCoy, what is wrong with Spock?" asked Kirk, attacking the Doctor before he could pull himself together.

McCoy pulled his head up sharply and then cried, "He is dying and there is nothing I can do."

Kirk shook McCoy. "Why?" he asked.

"He has been without food for the past month. I go and check the food supplies every month and I found out that all of Spock's food is contaminated. How it happened I do not know, but we can't restock until we reach Starbase Ten. He will have to go without for two more months. Oh, I can give him vitamins and so on, but supplements are just that - additions to the normal diet. He's starving to death."

Kirk thought for a while.

"I know Vulcans can go without food for a month with no great harm, but for three? He will be in a trance and would he be able to come out of it when he got food? He might be too weak.

"So we must find another planet that grows his food!" decided Kirk.

McCoy shook his head. "He won't do that. We must go to Maha Six. They need our presence there."

"But that is only talks. They'll go on whether we're there or not. Spock must live; I'm not going to watch him die."

Kirk stormed out of sickbay and went to see Spock. The doors opened. Spock was lying on his bed, his face drawn and pale. His eyes opened.

"So McCoy has told you. There is nothing you can do. You will carry on and look after the Enterprise as if it was your own," said Spock. His voice was weak.

"Why didn't you tell me? I thought we were becoming friends," said Kirk.

"Friends? I like that," said Spock with a smile, "but you have had a lot on your mind lately, and you had to come to terms with it all. I thank you for your concern. I will go to sleep now."

Kirk left and went to his own quarters. There must be somewhere near by where food suitable for Spock could be found. He called up a list of planets. There was one, called Debar. It had no Human life forms as it held large bear-like creatures that would attack anything they saw. The people who surveyed the planet said that it was like a giant forest with thick long grass and many flowers. They only stayed there three days, and one of the party had been killed. It was classed as 'Keep off', but there he would find plenty of food suitable for Vulcans. He must take the risk.

"Mr. Sulu, would you come to my quarters please," asked Kirk.

As Kirk waited for Sulu he tried to think of a plan so if anything went wrong no-one would get the blame except himself. The

doors opened to admit Sulu.

"Mr. Sulu, I will tell you the truth, then you can make your own mind up, but I will tell you this, I will order you if I must. Please sit."

Silence came at last and Kirk held himself still, waiting.

"Don't you think we've wasted enough time already, sir?" said Sulu, smiling.

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. I will tell Mr. Scott to give us maximum speed. How long will it take us?" asked Kirk.

"If we go at warp eight, we should be there in two days," said Sulu.

"Carry on. Make ready to come about," replied Kirk.

Kirk sat in the chair on the bridge. They had arrived four hours ahead of the time Mr. Scott have given them. *We are orbiting the planet; it seems calm. Dr. McCoy told me Spock has gone into a trance and he's moved him to sickbay so he could watch him. The men know what they must do.*

"Mr. Sulu, are the landing parties ready?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, sir. We will beam down in two teams of four; each party has two to gather and two Security to keep watch," said Sulu.

"Did they all volunteer? It could be dangerous," asked Kirk.

"Yes, sir," replied Sulu. He didn't add that most of the crew had put their names down. He had been able to pick out the best.

Both teams landed safely. One of them pointed to where they would find the food. The teams parted the very green grass where bushes grew now and then in a wide variety of colours. It was a lovely display, which took their breath away. The trees towered over them. It was a shame no Human could live there, but as the saying goes, "In every garden there are thorns." Kirk stood by Lt. Inch, watching and listening. At last they had enough.

"Kirk to Sulu, we are returning," said Kirk.

Just as they arrived back, two beasts came out of nowhere. They had long fur, great claws, long pointed noses and very sharp teeth. One of them slashed at Lt. Inch, but he rolled clear. Kirk shouted "Watch out!" He fired. The creature fell back to turn on him.

Kirk yelled, "Sulu, get everyone back to the ship! That's an order!"

"Come in, Enterprise. Five to beam up," said Sulu.

As the beam took the others, Sulu and Inch circled the beasts and fired. The creatures turned, and with a snarl, charged at Sulu. Kirk came out from behind a rock and saw what was happening.

"Fools!" he whispered.

He ran and fired as he saw Inch go down. Before the creatures could make up their minds, both Sulu and Kirk fired again.

"Kirk to Enterprise, stand by," said Kirk.

He ran over to where Lt. Inch was getting up. He tried to push Kirk away, but Kirk held on and pulled him to where Sulu was standing. Sulu pressed the button and they faded to arrive safely on the Enterprise pad with sighs of relief.

"Thank you all," said Kirk with a grin.

James T. Kirk, Personal Log

Never would I have thought such a thing possible, to lose a friend and brother, but to also have the chance to find him again. I know we are becoming friends, but it takes time.

McCoy has said that he has put Spock on an old-fashioned drip so that it does not injure his body tissue, as he is still in a trance and McCoy is not too sure if he can take solid food. The food was in a raw state, but McCoy said that it would only take a few minutes to adjust and refine it for the Vulcan.

It has been a week now and there is still no sign of him waking up. There must be something I can do. If he had been my Spock, I would have tried to mind meld with him, but this man does not know me well enough. I wonder... I have just thought... Could it work? Only one way to find out.

Kirk switched off his log, got up and hurried to sickbay. As he entered he saw McCoy looking at the screen above Spock's head.

"McCoy, is there any change?" asked Kirk.

The Doctor turned and shook his head.

"I would like to try something out. It may work. It did for me a long time ago."

"Anything is worth trying to bring him out of this trance," said McCoy.

With that, Kirk walked over to the console and pressed a button.

"Kirk to bridge."

"Lt. Armstrong here," said a soft female voice.

"In five minutes I want you to announce quietly that we're having a drill, then activate red alert and give it the works - abandon ship, the lot," said Kirk, thinking, *I must try and find out who Lt. Armstrong is. That silky voice...* Kirk went over to

Spock's bed, but not too near as he might feel his presence.

Kirk could feel sweat trickling down his back, knowing he was about to relive a past nightmare. 5...4...3...2...1...

"RED ALERT, RED ALERT, ALL HANDS ABANDON SHIP, I REPEAT, RED ALERT..."

Kirk stood frozen, his whole body tensed, waiting. Suddenly Spock sat up in bed, his eyes wide open. He screamed. "My ship, my Enterprise, no, I won't let you go!"

He started to get out of bed. That was when Kirk held him and shouted at him so he could hear.

"Spock, it's a drill. There's no danger to the Enterprise, all is well."

Spock gripped Kirk and stared at him. Kirk nodded and smiled. Spock let go and lay down.

After a few minutes, "Good, he has gone to sleep now and is on the mend," said McCoy, grinning.

Kirk was trembling. What if it had not worked? He must get away before he broke down. He fled back to his quarters. As he collected his thoughts about what he had done, over the console came Sulu's voice hailing from the bridge. There was a real red alert.

"What is it? Report, Mr. Sulu," ordered Kirk.

A ship headed for us. It's not answering our hail, sir," said Uhura.

"On my way," replied Kirk.

Kirk stared at the oncoming ship. Of course, if there was a storm or rip for his Enterprise to slip through to here, then surely the Klingon vessel which attacked his ship could have fallen through too. But what should he do? Here, the Klingons were friendly. If he fired, no one would believe that they came from another universe. All he would do was cause a war.

"Activate full shields, Mr. Sulu," he said.

"But, sir, it's a Klingon ship," answered Sulu.

"I do know that, Mr. Sulu, but they are not answering our hail, so it could be a lure. Lt. Armstrong, send despatch, we have an unknown ship approaching. Send it air wide," said Kirk.

The ship flew towards them. As it sped past, it opened fire. Various decks started to call in as the Enterprise was hit. The Klingon ship turned again. The crew must have thought it was the same Enterprise and set out to finish the job they had started.

"Mr. Sulu, give us some room and half phasers to stun," ordered

Kirk.

Suddenly, from nowhere, three more Klingon ships appeared. They fired on the ship. It was gone.

"Cancel that order," said Kirk.

The screen changed and a Klingon stood looking at him. He had black hair and blue eyes. *Handsome for a Klingon*, Kirk thought.

"This is Captain JanJor of the ship Norwich. Do you need any assistance? We will be sending a full report in. It must have been bandits who took the ship, as they would not answer our calls. We heard your call and appreciate your restraint in not firing on a Klingon ship despite the provocation."

"This is First Officer James T. Kirk. Thank you for your help, but we are all right, Captain. No serious damage."

The screen faded and he saw the ships move off. Kirk leaned back in his chair, feeling tired.

"Mr. Kirk, please report to my quarters at once."

Kirk looked down at his console. That was Spock. He had never been so happy. The tiredness slipped off him.

"That's an order," said Spock.

Kirk jumped up. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con. On my way, sir. Kirk out."

The door opened. Spock was sitting at his desk, but he still looked pale and drawn. Kirk went to stand by his desk.

"You don't have to say anything. I heard it all, and I want to thank you as it must have been very hard not to open fire on them. We have been ordered to Starbase Seven to make our report. Also, we will have a week's R & R," said Spock.

"Will they not wonder why I had put my shields up before the Klingons opened fire?" asked Kirk.

"No, because they should have signalled," said Spock. "Now go and rest. You have done your part, and thank you for saving my life. You took a chance. It could have been the ruin of you. Now go."

"It was worth it, and I'd do it again. You should rest too. I'm sure the Doctor thought you were resting," answered Kirk.

With that the door opened and McCoy stood there, not looking very pleased.

"You told me you would rest. If you don't get in that bed now, come straight back to sickbay."

At this Kirk burst out laughing. "Same old Bones!" Spock meekly stood up, moved over and lay on his bed.

Kirk put his arm around McCoy's shoulder and pulled him towards

the door, which closed behind them. Spock closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

Captain Spock's log.

The Enterprise is orbiting Starbase Seven. We have been ordered to see Admiral Tissel to make our report on the Klingon ship which attacked us.

They beamed down and were greeted by Admiral Tissel. He was a large man with light ginger hair and brown eyes which seemed to bore through you.

"Come this way. Please sit," said Tissel.

They entered his office. It was small but very comfortable. The Admiral saw Kirk looking around.

"You are wondering why I have such a small room for my size, Mr. Kirk? I see it in your face, but sometimes I think I am back on my ship and don't have much space. I envy you gentlemen.

"Now to your report. The Klingons are stating that an unknown virus must have taken over the ship and sent all the crew mad." He paused and looked at them both, then carried on. "That's why they never hesitated, but fired and destroyed the ship when they knew the Enterprise was under attack. Well done, Mr. Kirk. You held back and only fired a warning shot, otherwise it could have started a war. Your First Officer acted well, Captain Spock."

"Mr. Kirk acted as I would expect him to," said Spock.

"Of course, that's why I have called you here to tell Mr. Kirk that your name has gone forward to be made up to Captain," said Tissel, sounding pleased.

Kirk was stunned. This was a surprise.

"Thank you, sir. It is a great honour." Not looking at Spock, he added, "But the answer must be no. Not yet."

"Yes," said Spock. "I agree."

Kirk turned as Spock stood up, his face a mask.

"Mr. Kirk feels that he is not ready to take command of a starship, but if you could put the promotion on hold, later on, with my training, he will become a Captain," said Spock.

"If that's what you want, Mr. Kirk?"

Kirk nodded, trying not to laugh.

"Then I will not hold up your leave any longer," said Tissel.

Kirk and Spock never said a word until they reached Spock's quarters. Once they both got a drink and sat down the talking

started.

"Why did you refuse to be a Captain? You are a leader of men and had your own ship," asked Spock.

"Because I found I need more than being a Starship Captain. I lost my crew and my special friends, and Fate gave me another chance to be with them again; I could not bear to lose them all again so soon. I would be on my own. Unless you don't want me?" said Kirk.

"Jim, I do not want you to go. Since you have been here I understand more and want you as my special friend, and for you to call me brother. I would like you to come to Vulcan, and there in front of witnesses I'll make you my bond brother," said Spock.

Kirk looked at Spock. There was no mask now. For once the Vulcan looked lost and alone.

"I would be honoured to become your bond brother, Spock."

"When we get to Vulcan I will mind meld with you. It will only be a light touch as it will take time for your mind to be able to stand the strain. Do not worry, it will not change you and I will not read your thoughts. Only if you wish will you be able to talk to me through the meld," said Spock.

James T. Kirk, personal log.

Vulcan was just like before. We did not have the chance to meet Sarek, as he was away, but he send a message to us.

We went to an old temple and on the altar stood a large black book. Inside it the leaves of paper were very thin, but strong. Spock wrote his name and I did the same. Only then did I realise it was gold ink.

The wording was in English as well as Vulcan. For me it went like this:-

"Spock, son of Sarek, and James T. Kirk, make pledge to become bond brothers, to share all deeds and honour to their blood kin. All rights do they share and on the death of one all family wealth and rights go to the brother. No law can intervene in what has passed."

Spock laid his fingers on my head, and I felt a warm feeling flowing through my mind. I must have said something like "Coming home", and I heard "I agree".

The great ship was full of noise as it got ready to depart from the starbase. Spock sat in his quarters thinking about the events on Vulcan. The doors opened and Kirk stood there. He came over and handed Spock a box. Spock knew what it was, but all the same he opened it, and lying there was the IDIC medal.

"Thank you, Jim," said Spock.

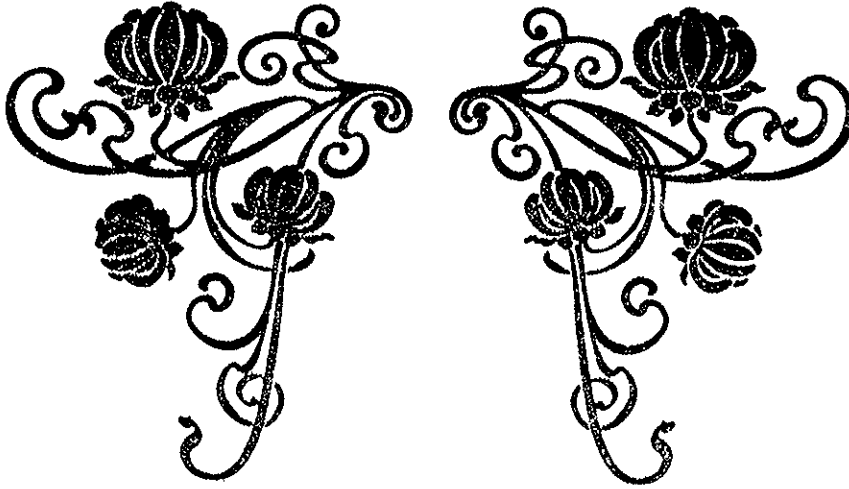
"That one was Spock's. I know he'd wish you to have it," whispered Kirk.

Spock placed the medal over his head so that it lay next to his skin. It felt warm, as if it had come home. Kirk looked at Spock and nodded, and saw gentle brown eyes looking at him as if afraid to spoil the moment.

Suddenly Kirk pulled himself up and said, "Come on, Captain, friend, brother. We've got work to do."

Spock smiled and added, "Yes - Captain, friend, bond brother."

With that both walked through the door to look after the ship, Enterprise.



THE TRAVELLER

The Traveller was old,
Older than many could conceive;
It travelled through space -
Singing.
It constantly received songs from others,
Adding them to its vast collection.
So when it lost one of its songs,
It decided to investigate.
When the Traveller arrived at the small, blue planet,
It could find no trace of the Singers,
So it decided to prepare the planet,
And make it ready for a new species of Singers.
Then it heard them -
They were young and were few,
But the singers had returned.
The Traveller rejoiced and ceased its work on the planet,
And after reassuring itself as to the
Continued safety and well-being of the Singers,
It left the small, blue world,
And continued on its endless journey -
Singing.

Christine Jones



ACCEPTANCE

by

Sheryl Peterson

"Why did you leave him, Kirk?!!"

What was the look in your eyes as my voice thundered at you across the confines of that room, hung with Earth weapons like some warrior hall on Vulcan?

Never had I understood it... the devotion my son felt for you. You were Human and fallible... Spock was Vulcan and perfect.

He was my son, and he died for you. Yet you left him on Genesis! Now all that he was... was lost. You had failed him when he needed you most.

WHY?!!

Even when I searched your mind and laid bare the grief that seethed beneath the surface calm you presented to others, even to me, I did not fully understand, perhaps.

Naturally you grieved. After all, you had lost an officer who had been at your side for years...

You called each other 'friend'.

You *loved*, even, in your emotional Human way...

But *why* did he care for you? Care deeply enough to - !

I left you then your promise to bring him back ringing in my ears. But I could not believe... and hope is a Human emotion.

I went to prepare the way... in case...

But I could not allow myself to hope.

Now I face you again on the steps of Mount Seleya. Here you carried the empty husk that was, and is again, my son, and restored him to his own as you promised on far-away Earth.

But at what *cost*, Kirk?

There is a *loss* in you underlying your relief at Spock's return.

I have indeed learned now at what price you restored my son to me.

Your own son is dead, lost forever with Genesis, his flawed creation. Newly found and newly lost... for the sake of Spock.

And your ship, the proud Enterprise, which I know Spock secretly called home, as he never did *this* planet. It too is gone with Genesis.

You have *indeed* paid a heavy price.

Yet the look in your eyes as you behold once again the face of my son, who only stands here alive because of your devotion - and that of McCoy and your people gathered here now - knows nothing of regret... of bitterness... or fear of what the future holds if Starfleet should seek to punish you for what you have done.

There is only love, the like of which I saw in the eyes of Amanda when she first held our son in her arms.

And I feel humbled all over again.

I did not understand what Spock saw in you, Kirk, when first I was told of your friendship.

I would not *believe* you could be worthy of the devotion Spock gave you.

It is *I* who am unworthy, not thee.

I beg forgiveness, t'hy'la of my son...

But there are no words with which I can offer my gratitude.

(Previously published by Conquest (Australia))



ART THEE VULCAN

(Written after reading Wheel of Fortune.)

T'Pau, it is you who is blind,
Blinded by the very logic that you say he has lost,
For how can it be logical to deny that what is,
Yet this you would have him do no matter what the cost.

T'Pau, the time has come for you to now accept
That Spock is not fully Vulcan as you would have him be,
His human half as well combines to make him what he is,
I almost lost him once because this I could not see.

T'Pau, you must understand, though head of the family,
You have not the right to order Spock home again to take a wife.
I have given him my blessing to decide where his future lies,
For he alone must be the one to choose his way in life.

Maureen Frost.



MAD HUNTER

by

Sherry Golding

Earth, 23rd Century

Dr McCoy cursed when his large rucksack fell, with a thud, on the marbled floor.

Damn! Of all the stupidest ideas Jim's come up with! He just had to go and pick a camping vacation today of all days, he thought to himself as he picked up the rucksack again. Christ, it weighs a ton! What does Jim think I am, a bodybuilder, or a doctor?

He looked up when Captain Kirk approached him, a smile, as usual, on his attractive face.

"Having problems?" he asked.

"Jim, you packed my bag, what did you put in it, a wardrobe? We're going away for two days, not a goddamn year," McCoy grumbled.

"Serves you right, Bones. That's what you get for getting me to do your work for you."

McCoy looked at him, "Damn it, Jim. I had an important meeting last night."

"With the Professor?" asked Kirk.

"Actually, Jim, the Professor was quite interesting."

"'Interesting' Bones, or was it because the Professor happens to be a female?"

McCoy looked up as Spock and Sulu came to Kirk's side. He chewed his tongue.

"Well?" asked Kirk, probing for an answer.

McCoy glanced at Spock, who had just raised an eyebrow, his face curious.

"Well nothing," snapped McCoy, angrily bending down in an attempt to pick up his rucksack.

Damn, it was heavy. His face reddened.

"Doctor, will you allow me to - "

McCoy brushed Spock's hand away. "I can manage," he said, angrily. He cwooped the rucksack up, with a great deal of effort and limped towards the shuttle. Kirk looked at Spock, and smiled.

.

The white shuttlecraft drifted slowly through Earth's scenery, and passed beautiful still blue lakes. Kirk came to McCoy's side and laid a firm hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"Beautiful, Bones, so incredibly beautiful. You know, I could even leave the Enterprise for all this."

McCoy smiled, his blue eyes squinting under the glare of the rising sun. "You can but you won't, Jim. You love the Enterprise too much."

Kirk nodded, "Yes, I agree. I agree, Bones, but just for once, just this weekend, I'm going to forget that she ever existed. I'm going to enjoy this vacation. That's not selfish, is it?"

McCoy smiled warmly. "What do you think, Jim?"

Kirk shrugged, and glanced at the pine trees again.

"Your heart tells you to enjoy yourself, Jim. You can't be with the Enterprise every day of your life. What's that saying now, that the longer you're with something or someone, the boredom creeps in. Something like that anyway."

Kirk smiled and McCoy turned to look out the window.

Kirk touched his shoulder again. "You don't look too happy," he said with concern.

"I'm fine, Jim, just old age creeping up on me, I suppose." He turned and looked at the Captain. "Jim, soon we're going to be too old for the Enterprise - you said it yourself. Hell, Jim, I'm going to miss our adventures, our little episodes. I'm going to miss them, Jim."

"Captain, the shuttle is approaching our planned location, by Lake Terriffe. I suggest you strap your seat belts on," Sulu interrupted from the Navigation seat.

The shuttle landed with a small bump. The engines faded and only the sound of bird-song remained. Spock stood up abruptly and made towards McCoy's rucksack. McCoy unstrapped himself and pushed in front of the Vulcan officer.

"What do you think you're up to, you green blooded Vulcan?" he grumbled.

"Doctor, if you don't mind," Spock said, picking up the bag as if it were a light leaf.

"Yes, I do mind, you green blooded computer - "

"Doctor, if we allow you to carry this bag you will be injured and our vacation will be at an end. Now if - "

"In that case, Spock you'd better give me the rucksack. You don't like vacations, remember; or - " McCoy's eyes sparkled, his face full of humour. "Or are you doing it because you care, Spock?"

Spock raised an eyebrow, his face showing no emotion. "Care, Doctor? That is an alien word to me. I am not capable of such emotion."

"Yet you cared that the vacation might be stopped," teased McCoy. "You - "

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," laughed Kirk. "We're on vacation. Can't we be friends for once?" he asked, looking at both officers, "Yes?"

"Friends with him?" asked McCoy, "You've got to be joking. It'll be like talking to a medical computer."

Spock raised an eyebrow as McCoy left the shuttle. Kirk smiled.

"Gentlemen. I suggest we join the good Doctor."

The air was cool, the day warm, the sky cloudless. Birds sang from branches of tall pine trees and a soft whispering wind created small ripples in the clear blue lake. Kirk smiled to himself as he watched his two officers, McCoy and Spock, attempting to put up the large tent.

"Spock, don't you know how to put up a blasted tent, damn it?" hissed McCoy. "It's falling on top of me, for Christ's sake."

"Doctor, I do believe you like the sound of your own voice. If the tent is falling it is because you haven't yet pegged in the fourth and fifth pegs. If you allow me to finish this myself, I - "

"You're not getting off with that one so easily, Spock. I'll show you're capable of error yet. Now let's get back to work, you green blooded - "

"Captain, I think McCoy is going to miss those arguments with Spock when we retire," smiled Sulu.

Kirk smiled back and turned to catch sight of a beautiful deer gazing down at them. Sulu stepped forward with awe.

"Beautiful, isn't she, Captain? I must take a photo. I promised Uhura a picture of the wildlife here."

Suddenly there was the sound of a gunshot. Kirk looked up sharply as the deer staggered and fell. Then he was running alongside Sulu, aware of Spock and McCoy behind him, to where the deer now lay in a pool of blood.

Kirk knelt down, as did Sulu and McCoy. There was a gentle humming sound from McCoy's tricorder. He looked up with concern.

"The deer's dead, Jim."

Kirk stood up and clenched his fists.

"Why would anyone want to kill such a beautiful creature, Captain?" asked Sulu.

"Spock, have you located the man's whereabouts?"

Spock came by Kirk's side, face sullen. "Captain, something is interfering with my instruments."

Kirk shot him a bewildered look. "Explain."

Spock looked blank. "I cannot explain, Captain. Something is interfering with my instruments, but that something is still unknown. I do not know what it is."

Kirk took out his communication device. "Then I'll contact Starfleet Security," he replied, opening it up. He touched a switch. Nothing! He looked at Spock.

"May I, Captain?" asked Spock, taking it from him. After a while he looked at Kirk again. "As I suspected, Captain. Whatever it is interfering with my instruments is interfering with your communication device."

Sulu looked up. "Mine is the same, Captain."

"Bones?"

McCoy nodded. "Mine too, Captain."

"Then I suggest we return to the shuttle immediately. We could be in danger here."

The officers quickly followed Kirk to the shuttle and entered. Sulu made quickly to Navigation. Suddenly he looked up, with shock and half surprise.

"Captain, she's not responding, the engines are down!"

Spock rushed over and checked the controls and engine power. He looked up sharply. "It is not responding," he confirmed.

Damn! Kirk grabbed McCoy and led him outside. "Put your phaser on stun; if anything moves, stun it."

"Jim!" said McCoy, pointing to Kirk's left. Kirk looked up sharply. There, a few meters away, was a small male deer, looking curiously at them, its tiny tail flicking from side to side, its ears raised.

In panic, McCoy rushed towards it. "Shoo, shoo!" he shouted, "Scram, beat it!"

A gunshot echoed. McCoy stumbled backwards and fell. The deer was flung in the air, and then dropped like a falling rock.

Kirk rushed forward as Spock and Sulu came running out. In concern, he knelt down and touched McCoy.

"Bones, Bones!" he said with worry and concern. "Bones, are you all right?"

McCoy sat up quickly and angrily. "I'm all right, Jim. Fell over that goddamn rock. The deer?"

Kirk looked at Sulu, who was now beside the fallen deer. Sulu shook his head. "It's dead, Captain."

Kirk stood up with anger. "Who's doing this, and why?"

"Captain, I do believe that this hunter, or whatever we may like to call him - or her - has a twentieth century style hunting

rifle modified to shoot up to a range of one mile, perhaps even two."

Kirk looked at him. "Two miles. Are you serious, Spock?"

"I calculated, Captain. Considering the fact that we are near a lake, and that the shot came from there, I deduced that the gun was fired from the other side of the lake, which is, Captain, a mile long."

"Jim," McCoy called, looking up from where the deer lay. Kirk and Spock crossed over to him.

"Jim, look at its head. There's a line there moving in a zigzag - it's quite transparent."

"Bones, what is it?"

"It's a signal, Jim. I've seen it before, somewhere. It makes the deer come to us. It somehow brainwashes it into thinking we are female deer, or friends, even family. Then a hunter can easily shoot it."

"Why? For what reason are these deer forced to come to us? Why not to the hunter himself?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Strange," he said.

"Strange?" asked Kirk.

"I do believe, Captain, that I have no answer."

"No answer?" asked McCoy. "Is that green blooded Vulcan actually admitting - "

"Spock, could the first deer been killed to lure us from the shuttle, so that this - "

"No, Jim, as I mentioned earlier I believe this hunter is a mile, perhaps two, away from us. If the shuttle is not working then I suspect it is because of some mechanical device which has caused the malfunction of all our instruments."

"Jim, don't you think we ought to get out of here? I don't know about you but my nervous stomach is playing up."

"If you want to walk twenty-five miles, go ahead, Bones," replied Kirk with sarcasm.

"Captain, I suggest we get away from the lake and indeed head back to Starbase. Staying here may put us seriously in danger," suggested Spock.

Kirk nodded, slowly. "Okay, grab your bags, let's head back home."

The sun became hotter, the day, the hours, the minutes, every second, seeming longer. McCoy sat down on a large boulder. Kirk stopped, his feet blistered, sweat pouring off him like a river.

"Bones."

"You go on, Jim, I can't move another step."

"We go together Bones, or not at all."

He came up beside McCoy, and flopped down beside him.

"Captain, must I remind you - " began Spock.

"Spock, just because you're a goddamn machine doesn't exclude the fact that we are Human," grumbled McCoy. "Now sit down, will you? Doctor's orders."

"Very well," said Spock. "I see no reason why we should be followed. It is not logical to do so."

"Logical?" asked McCoy. "What has logic got to do with it? That lunatic is killing deer in front of us, and has kept us here, God knows why. When a thing like that happens, Spock, it's a foregone conclusion that we'll be witnessing more of the same thing, if not each of our own deaths."

"I merely meant, Doctor, that it is not logical to follow us. The hunter was at a distance when he shot those deer and will have lost us by now, logically speaking that is, since we have taken several routes since then."

"Captain!" exclaimed Sulu.

Kirk stood up. In front of them, in the forest's clearing, was another deer. He quickly picked up a stone and threw it. The deer bolted, and darted away but then came the sound of a gunshot. It was flung around and landed heavily on the muddy ground. Kirk sprinted towards it and Spock grabbed his arm. Kirk swung around, and looked at Spock angrily.

"Damn it Spock, that hunter has got to pay - "

"Jim, you will not find the hunter. The gun is so sophisticated that we would not find its owner soon enough; he will not be waiting for us."

Kirk calmed down. "Those animals, so beautiful, so damn innocent. What is this, Spock, some game? Why? *Why* is he doing this?"

"I am interested to know *how*. Captain, he knew we were here. He had first to cross the lake. By that time we would have been gone."

"A tracker?" asked Kirk.

"Perhaps, Captain, perhaps." Spock looked thoughtful. "Is his gun so sophisticated he can see us through a powerful telescope, or - " He held up his hand to silence the team. "Jim," he began again, "we know of extra sensory perception and telepathy, but could this person be a Zorn? Their hearing is so acute they can hear people talking from two, even three miles away. From what I know of them they act on sound and can shoot a target by sound alone; they are in fact virtually blind. That is only a guess but if I am correct he can in fact hear all what we say and can trace us by sound alone - even the sound of our footsteps."

Kirk looked at him. Yes. Yes! Zorns were once great hunters,

hearing anything from a distance and using their ears to serve as their eyes as well. But why was he killing deer in front of them? Why?

"They can hear us - that is physical - but are they telepaths?"

Spock slowly nodded when he realised what the Captain was getting at. "Indeed, Captain, indeed. Let's find out, shall we?"

Without feeling, without thought or emotion, he placed both hands on the sides of Kirk's head, pressing firmly but gently.

"I am linking my mind with yours, yours with mine. My thoughts are yours and yours are mine. We are linked together in a bond which cannot be broken until I release you. Speak to me your thoughts, open your mind." Spock quivered. *\Yes, yes, I hear your thoughts, I hear you now. No-one else can hear our thoughts. A plan? Yes, Captain, a plan. I shall link minds with Dr McCoy and Sulu, they must know of our plans.*

Darkness, a glimpse of thousands of stars. So beautiful, so peaceful. McCoy sat with Sulu, speaking naturally, ignoring the bitter winds which moaned around them.

Kirk crawled his way silently through muddy ground, untangling his sweater now and again from protruding tree branches. *It must have rained heavily the other night*, he thought to himself as he tried to see through the darkness. Then he caught sight of a deer trotting towards Sulu and McCoy's camp.

Not too long now, only a mile and it would reach them. The hunter seemed unaware of what Spock and Kirk had planned, .

Kirk quickened his pace. Somewhere near. The hunter had to be somewhere near!

But where? Which direction? Kirk hoped that Sulu and McCoy were all right.

The stars lit up the darkness as the trees became thicker. Up ahead - a shadow! Kirk tensed - but no, it was Spock. Damn! The deer would be near their camp now. Kirk clenched his fists. Damn the hunter, damn that hunter, the sick -

The sound of a gun cocking! Kirk turned sharply. There! A shadow, a person! Kirk ran forward lightly - the person turned and - Wham! Kirk collided with the butt of the weapon. He felt a burning pain as he smashed against a thick tree stump. The person yelled and rushed Kirk!

Not yet. Not yet. Now! Kirk sidestepped and laid a heavy punch in the person's stomach. The person yelled in pain and Kirk pushed the hunter against the tree stump. He raised a fist and -

A strong hand stopped him.

"Jim, I believe that Starfleet will take care of this Zorn."

Kirk angrily released the Zorn. "Why did you - "

"Jim, this Zorn has lived here for a long time without anyone knowing, obviously. His equipment is highly advanced and can, as we know, cut off our instruments and render us helpless. Luckily for

us he was not a telepath, and that we wore those silent Vulcan slippers which I fortunately brought with me, or he would have heard us approaching."

"Yes," smiled Kirk, "the slippers you Vulcans have to wear to keep silence in your Temples."

He looked at the Zorn again. "Spock, get a message through to Starfleet Security immediately."

Captain's Log. Our vacation on Earth has come to an end, if you can call it that. I leave Earth with sad memories, a thought of those beautiful creatures being slain, their lives being snatched away as if life has no importance to those who kill. It is as if killing proves something to the killer, yet all it can prove is insanity or some kind of inferiority. Dr McCoy has had a chance to examine this person and Spock has probed his mind. It is believed he killed the deer for 'us'. He believed that Humans would be sickened and upset by the killings and that triggered off this 'idea' to kill those deer, so as to hurt us, our feelings. In fact it gave him great pleasure knowing that what he was doing upset us. Why he should so want to upset Humans remains a mystery.

Kirk sat back and watched with sadness the stars that floated by.

"I still can't believe he did it, Jim. That man's thoughts, his... inspirations. I am a Doctor and I still can't figure what would make a person do that."

"Well, Doctor, blame your Human emotions. Had you not cared, those deer would still be alive, for this Zorn would have found no reason to hurt you."

"Now look here, you green - "

"Sulu, ahead warp factor three," interrupted Kirk, standing up. He left the bridge noiselessly and quickly. Concerned, McCoy watched him go and then followed him.



food for scott

by

Nina Lynch

Scotty looked at the 'haggis' on his plate and swore to himself. He'd had enough. This idea just wasn't going to work. He walked slowly over to the food replicator in the wall and gave it a long hard look. Then, in a manner not at all consistent with a Chief Engineer, he kicked it. His reward? Yet another bowl of brown goo which the replicator announced as 'haggis'.

The next day was typical of the Scottish Highlands, with a mist hanging in the air. Montgomery Scott gazed out of the window of his small flat. The beauty of his native Scotland always moved him and he was glad he had decided to take his shore leave here. He tore his eyes away from the view outside and looked at the view inside. There were bowls of varying shapes and sizes scattered around on every available space, all filled with a different substance - all of them supposedly the replicator's idea of haggis, and all of them bearing no resemblance at all to the haggis he remembered from his childhood.

The party was due soon, and Kirk, Spock and McCoy were arriving from Yosemite to what Scotty had promised would be a real 'shindig'. The effect of Sha Ka Ree on them all had made them each appreciate the friends they had, and each other's company.

If Scotty had had more time he could have taken the replicator apart and made a few crucial adjustments, but then again it still might not have worked. As he threw the last bowl of 'goo' away, he knew he couldn't face any more of it from the replicator.

There must be another way. Scotty had promised himself that he would serve haggis at the party and by all that was Scottish, he would!

Scotty entered the large food market which, considering the availability of food replicators, was still quite busy. He made his way through the crowd to the meat department, the smell taking his breath away. He closed his eyes for a second and was a small boy again shopping with his 'mam'.

"Can I help you?"

Scott opened his eyes and looked at the assistant behind the counter. He looked at his list and gave his order to the young man, who began to assemble it all.

"Are you making haggis?"

This time the question came from beside him. He turned to reply and came face to face with the questioner, who continued,

"It must be for a very special occasion. Burns Night isn't for a while."

"You're right there," Scotty replied, almost instinctively. He then took a closer look at the person standing in front of him. She was about 40 years old and dressed very casually. She had short greying hair and the brownest eyes Scotty could ever remember seeing, and although she wasn't fat she had, as Scotty would say to himself, 'a bit of meat on her'.

"Why don't you use a food replicator?" she enquired.

"I did." Scotty visibly winced at the recollection of the brown goo he'd disposed of. "But it wasn't at all successful. I think my replicator is on the blink." He found himself talking very easily to this stranger about his disasters and even when he'd collected his packages of heart, lungs, liver and sheep's stomach from the assistant, he found himself still wanting to talk to her.

"Can you recommend a good place to get my potatoes and turnip from, Miss...?" He hesitated, realising he didn't know her name.

"Natalie," she replied. "Natalie Colvin. Most people call me Natty." She extended her hand to Scotty, who had to juggle his packages for a moment before he grasped her hand.

"I am Montgomery Scott, but I'd be pleased if you would call me Scotty."

"Well, Scotty, let's go and get your tatties and neeps th' now."

They spent the rest of the morning buying things for his party. Some items he'd intended to get, and others were suggested by Natty to make his party go with a swing. Scotty found himself remarkably at ease with her, and although he'd just met her he felt as though he'd known her all his life. They talked of the past, the present and what the future might hold for them. She was particularly interested to hear that he served on board the Enterprise, and listened intently to all the escapades he related to her. He too listened to all she had to say. She was English but had moved to Scotland on her marriage to Martin. When he died ten years ago, in a freak accident, she had decided to stay in Scotland where her boys had their friends. Matthew, her eldest, had applied to the Academy, and Stephen had gone on some scientific mission. She, herself, had never left Earth, and had no intention of ever doing so.

"Do you mean to say you have never left Earth, by choice?" Scotty was incredulous.

"Yes. Even school trips off planet I managed to wangle out of. I'd rather stay in my home where nothing too out of the ordinary ever happens."

They stood outside the market, knowing that goodbyes were due to be said, but neither of them wanting the morning to end.

"I don't suppose I could ask a favour of you?" Scotty enquired.

"You can always ask."

"I don't suppose you could help me make the haggis?"

Natty agreed to help with the haggis and returned with him to his flat. They prepared all the ingredients and left them in the fridge whilst Scotty took her out to dinner.

Natty didn't return to her own house that evening, or the next. She helped Scotty to organise the party and even made a small imitation haggis for Spock after hearing he was a Vulcan and, therefore, a vegetarian.

James Kirk, Spock and McCoy arrived together at the appointed time. If any of them felt surprise on seeing Natty there, they all hid it well. She and Scotty got on so well that in no time it seemed to the three new arrivals that she had always been at his side.

"Mr Spock, would you care for a shot of whisky?" asked Scotty.

Mr Spock raised an eyebrow and replied, "I would rather have it in a glass."

Kirk and McCoy glanced at each other, both of them thinking that tonight could be entertaining.

The party did go along with a swing as the whisky level in the bottle went down. All enjoyed the cock-a-leekie soup, even Spock, who appreciated the fact that Natty had served him a bowl of soup saying,

"There you are, Mr Spock, cock-a-leekie soup with no," she paused as she heard Kirk and McCoy stifle a laugh, "chicken. Plomeeks are a bit rare on Earth at this time of the year." Spock felt as though he had had his leg pulled but - it had to be the effect of all the whisky - he didn't care.

After all the soup had gone and yet more whisky, Scotty got out his bagpipes and began to play.

"Come on, Scotty. If you want us to have a sing-song, at least play something we know the words to," implored Kirk.

"I certainly don't know the words to that one," said McCoy over the skirl of the bagpipes.

"Well - " Spock's voice was as calm and unemotional as ever - "it certainly isn't Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

Kirk and McCoy giggled to themselves like a couple of cadets caught peeking in the girls' showers.

Scotty said nothing but continued to play as Natty came in carrying the biggest tray the two laughing officers could ever remember seeing. The laughter ceased as they looked at what was on the tray. Nobody said a word. They all waited for Scotty to finish his tune. When he'd finished, Kirk was the first to speak.

"Catchy little tune, Scotty, what's it called?"

Scott looked puzzled, and then he frowned.

"Do you ken, I canna rightly remember, all I do ken is that it is a tune tradishun... tradisu... " Scotty's mouth didn't seem to connect with his brain. He tried another way. "It is a tune played to pipe in the haggis. And that, gentlemen - " he made a grand gesture at the tray - "is haggis."

He rejoined them at the table and sat down forcibly in his chair.

Natty smiled at them all. This was definitely the best haggis she had ever made, the mashed potatoes and turnip surrounding it mere pawns to the king. She took up a knife and, looking round the table, asked,

"Who's first?"

The four officers of the Enterprise for once sat in complete silence. Scotty sat with a look of complete reverence on his face as he surveyed the haggis set in the middle of the tray. Mr Spock sat with his fingers steepled in his usual manner and he too studied the haggis, the only movement on his ever calm face the upward movement of his right eyebrow. His thoughts took him back to the Enterprise library. He knew that McCoy had altered the information with regard to the subject of camping out, and Spock was convinced that he had also altered the information contained in the tape on Scottish food. The haggis on the plate bore no resemblance to the haggis he had had described to him back on the ship. That haggis had four legs, two of which were shorter to enable the haggis to walk round the Scottish hills without falling over.

Spock took his gaze off the haggis and turned to face McCoy, who had also been studying the haggis. The doctor seemed to sense Spock looking at him and returned the gaze. He realised the reason for the look, and for his reply raised his eyebrow to match Spock's, a look of complete innocence on his face.

McCoy wondered if the Vulcan actually knew what was contained in a haggis, but as he looked once more he noticed a small one tucked away behind it. As it had a vaguely greenish appearance, he imagined that Natty had taken the Vulcan's eating requirements into account, and had made a vegetarian one for him. McCoy turned to look at Kirk, who had noticed the exchanged raised eyebrows and was sitting with a small grin on his face.

Kirk looked at the haggis on the tray with various thoughts running through his mind, the uppermost one being that if he had in the past had Plomeek soup without too many ill effects, then he was sure he could eat haggis without causing his insides any permanent damage. Well, 'in for a penny, in for a pound' as the old Earth saying went. He held out his plate to the expectant Natty and said,

"I will claim the privilege of rank and be the first served."

Natty smiled at him as she took his proffered plate and expertly served him his portion. McCoy followed Kirk's lead and held out his plate, watching as it was filled with haggis and accompaniments. Mr Spock's plate received the small green haggis. Natty served Scott and then herself. The three previously served officers noticed that Scotty seemed to have been served with a bigger portion than themselves.

Although Kirk and McCoy had never tasted a true haggis, they found to their surprise that they were enjoying it. The haggis that

Natty had served them was nothing like the replicated ones they had tried elsewhere.

Scotty was savouring every mouthful of his portion. It was just as he remembered it tasting in his childhood. He glanced round the table at everyone else, noting that they were all demolishing their meals with the vigour of people who had never eaten a decent meal in their lives. Even Spock, whose vegetarian haggis had looked rather disgusting to Scotty's eyes, seemed to be enjoying it. Mind you, with Spock you could never tell if he was enjoying something or not.

Soon all the plates were empty and stacked away in the kitchen area. The conversation, and the whisky, began to flow again.

Natty pattered about cleaning away plates and saucepans and refilling their glasses. She added nothing to the conversation, which consisted mainly of reminiscences of their five year mission, with the occasional interjection about their recent encounter with Sybok.

After a while, Natty decided that they had had time for their haggis to settle and she returned to the kitchen. Kirk, Spock and McCoy could hear noises coming from the secluded area that served as a kitchen, but had no idea as to their meaning. They turned to Scotty, who sat with an all knowing look on his face.

Natty came in with the object of Scotty's smile. Scotty turned to Spock and said, "Now even you can eat this, laddie."

Spock made no reply. He sniffed the air and was able to distinguish various items, cinnamon, ginger, sultanas and walnuts being among them.

"Come on then, Scotty." McCoy decided to ask the question on his mind. "Are you going to tell us what it is?"

"That, gentlemen - " Scotty's voice had more of a Scottish burr to it than ever, and he began his sentence again. "That, gentlemen, is Black Bun!" And he made another grand gesture at the sweet.

Spock regarded the pastry cake and again wondered at the illogical names Terrans gave to things.

Natty had cut several slices of the Black Bun and served them each a slice. These were consumed appreciatively, washed down with yet more whisky.

As the table was cleared once again, Kirk held up his glass and gazed intently at the whisky contained within it. Spock and McCoy watched him, both of them with the feeling that he was about to say something quite breathtaking.

"You can keep all your syn, synt, synthehol." Kirk's speech was becoming affected by the alcohol. "Because *this* - " he held his glass even higher - "is the real McCoy." And after saying that he drained his glass in one.

McCoy and Kirk, after realising what he had said, clutched the table as they both burst into hysterical laughter. Spock just stared. He was definitely feeling strange. He opened his mouth to speak, but found that his brain and vocal cords were out of synch. Following Kirk's example, he too drained his glass.

Scotty just looked at his Captain and C.M.O. and said, "I'll drink to that."

The four men left the table and made their way, albeit staggeringly, to the more relaxed atmosphere of the easy chairs.

As they made their way to the sitting area, Scott removed two long, and rather dangerous looking, swords from the wall. He laid them crossed on the floor and then proceeded to perform a complicated set of steps over the swords. He then pulled McCoy to his feet and persuaded him to join in.

Natty watched them. She understood quite a lot about Starfleet crews. She also knew how hard they worked and, as she was seeing now, how hard they played. From what Scotty had told her of their previous mission, they certainly deserved some time off to relax and enjoy themselves.

McCoy sat back down clutching at his feet as Scott tried to persuade Kirk to have a go. Kirk was having trouble standing up, let alone dancing, as he clutched his sides helpless with laughter.

Spock was perplexed.

"Mr Scott." He spoke even more slowly than usual. "Would it not be more advisable to use two pieces of wood instead of real swords, so as not to damage your feet?"

"Och, no, laddie," was Scott's reply. "This way is much more fun." He then sat down heavily next to McCoy.

"Fun?" queried Spock as he turned to the Doctor, who was still rubbing his feet.

"Fun," added McCoy.

Spock then turned to Kirk who, not trusting himself to speak, just mouthed the word, 'Fun'.

The more sombre and unemotional Spock tried to remain, the more the other three officers laughed. Even a raised eyebrow from him caused more fits of laughter.

Then they began to sing, sometimes in unison, sometimes a round, but always with gusto.

Natty recognised 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat', 'Moon Over Rigel 7', 'Pack Up Your Troubles', and even 'Kin Kan Kooli'. She decided to leave them to it and made her way to the door. As she opened it, she took one more look at them. Theirs was a friendship made in the stars and nothing would break it, ever.

Scotty looked up and smiled at her. He knew where she lived and how he could get hold of her if, and when, he wanted.

She quietly left the room and as the door gently closed behind her, she heard the four men singing 'Auld Lang Syne'.



THE QUESTORS

by

Pony Godic

Christine Chapel sat looking at Dr McCoy across his neat desk. She had always found him to be a good listener. There was no denying McCoy's crusty side - he did not suffer fools gladly. Nonetheless, he possessed sound common sense, uncanny intuition and great patience when called for. He was also kind, sometimes gentle, but, above all, he was determined; some would say obstinate. He was just the sort of doctor Chapel hoped to be, though she was honest enough to admit to herself that her personality was more sensitive and giving, that she did not have her colleague's natural aptitude for intimidation and that she was often too conservative in her approach to medicine for she possessed a more methodical mind, seldom experienced intuition and, unlike her superior, would not have trusted it even if she had. Chapel was very capable and, in her own way, just as gifted a healer as the colourful Dr McCoy. She was qualified to practise medicine as a doctor in the civilian world but, in Starfleet, her credentials qualified her only for the position of Nurse. Medicine in Starfleet was an elitist discipline and the position of Doctor involved years of practical application and study in the specialised fields of space medicine and psychology.

Frowning slightly, Christine Chapel asked, "What would you suggest?"

McCoy looked into the clear blue eyes of his assistant and said, "Well, Chris, I got my exo/psych unit doing a thesis on Alushyn aggression. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"Well I'm obviously not," Chapel quietly rejoined. Her brow furrowing, she enquired, without really expecting an answer, "Why does the final unit standing between me and my preliminary Starfleet Surgeon's Certificate have to be in exobiological psychology?"

Folding his wiry arms, McCoy nodded sympathetically. "Mmm, the rules stating you have to be practising on a Starship to get Surgeon's papers is fine till you get to the exo/psych unit."

Chapel observed, "It's very difficult if you're a Human practising on a Starship with an all-Human crew. Especially since we'll not be making any alien planetfalls for at least five months."

"Oh," her colleague said with a wicked light growing in his eyes, "the Enterprise isn't all Human - there is an exception, you know."

Chapel did a double take. "But Spock's half Human."

McCoy's craggy face was suddenly serious. "Chris, you've studied Spock's genetic makeup. You know that as a hybrid he had a one in a million chance of being conceived and yet he's here."

Besides the physical side, the structure of Vulcan society is rigid to say the least. I'm sure I'd get an argument on this from Spock, but Sarek's decision to marry his mother was not logical. The way I see it, it was an emotional act; dare I say it, an act of love."

"Yes, I'm sure you'd get an argument on that," Chapel laughed and the trouble lifted from her eyes.

"A logical debate," McCoy corrected. "But think about it Chris, what could be more alien than a hybrid - a genetic long-shot born of two radically different cultures?"

Chapel ran a thoughtful hand through her loose blonde hair and replied, "Yes, I see your point."

Regarding his assistant with shrewd eyes, McCoy confided, "I know I may appear to pick on and ride Spock, and I admit that his damned 'logic' irritates the hell out of me sometimes, but usually I'm just trying to get him to express some of that emotion he's been locking up inside himself all his life. Dammit, Chris, it's not healthy to suppress *everything* the way he does, and justify it with logic. After all, look at his background. His mother may be a very level-headed woman, but I've met her and there's no denying her warmth and sensitivity. And Vulcan society could never fully repress the individualism in Spock's father. Marrying an Earth woman is just one of the many unconventional things he's done. Yet Spock has coped with all of this by rigidly incorporating the Vulcan discipline of logic into his behaviour. On the other hand, he has gone against his father's wishes and joined Starfleet, thus reducing his contact with other Vulcans to the barest minimum. This is a highly suggestive contradiction, don't you think?"

"Mmm," Chapel pondered. "I sense Spock's vulnerability and sensitivity, I always have, but he functions perfectly and, on paper, he's about the healthiest person on board. But I gather you think I should draw up a submission for the Starfleet Medical Board."

"It sounds like a very interesting study to me, Chris - and bear in mind that it's in confidence and will never be published."

Chapel nodded more easily at that.

"I'll put in a recommendation for you, Chris. I'm quite interested to see what you come up with."

Christine Chapel duly requested permission to do her exobiological psychology unit on the Enterprise's First Officer, Mr Spock, and, much to her surprise, the Medical Board promptly accepted. No doubt Dr Leonard McCoy's recommendation influenced the Board in Chapel's favour, for the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer was highly respected in the Service.

However, because it was important to the validity of her results for Spock not to know he was the subject of her psychological study, Chapel kept a very low profile and merely observed the Vulcan from afar.

Life on board the Enterprise at that time was, frankly, dull. Security tours of Federation boundaries were renowned for their lack of action, and after only three weeks on this particular mission the

crew was slowly slipping into boredom. They had already worked their way through a series of maintenance checks and preparedness manoeuvres ordered by James T. Kirk, the Enterprise's highly respected and very capable Captain. The tour of the new-frontier Federation borders would take seven more months and Kirk intended that this respite from more active duty would be used to hone and further develop the skills of his crew, not blunt them. So, in spite of themselves, they were kept busy.

However, the Enterprise's Captain appreciated the therapeutic value of peace and quiet and had entered into a chess campaign against Spock as a way of resting and revitalising his mind in his off-duty hours. As time went by he came to notice the coincident appearance of Christine Chapel during these games, and wondered at it, but tactfully said nothing. Chapel seemed to appear in the background and stayed in the background, so perhaps it was simple coincidence after all.

"Checkmate," Spock said, moving his knight to the second level and penetrating Kirk's carefully prepared defence.

"Hmm," the Captain snorted, checking for the possibility of escape. "Yes, Mr Spock, a brilliant move."

Spock inclined his head modestly.

Kirk grinned and asked, "Spock, have you ever played poker?"

The First Officer, who was in the process of rearranging the chess board, replied, "You have asked me that question before, Captain, but I have not yet familiarised myself with the game."

Looking into Spock's bland eyes, Kirk realized that his friend had a formidable poker face. "Probably best not to bother, then."

"As you wish, Captain."

Kirk sighed and caught Christine Chapel's eye. She was sitting at an adjacent table working over what appeared to be notes. The Captain smiled questioningly and Chris Chapel looked decidedly caught out. A slight flush coloured her cheeks as she said, "Good afternoon, Captain."

"Good afternoon to you, Chris. You don't happen to be a chess master, do you? My First Officer's beating the pants off me."

Spock blinked at this unlikely statement and corrected, "The score is even, Captain."

Kirk laughed mildly. "Just teasing, Spock."

The First Officer raised a questioning eyebrow and folded his arms.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," Mr Sulu paged.

Kirk got up and went to the nearest communicator. "Yes, Mr Sulu?"

"Sir, there appears to be a disabled ship up ahead. We're still too far away to tell for sure, but it appears to be a Vulcan cruiser."

"I'm on my way, Mr Sulu - Kirk out."

The Captain strode towards the door, gathering his First Officer behind him with, "Spock, we're back on duty."

When they arrived, Sulu vacated the Captain's chair. "We've confirmed it's a Vulcan cruiser, research class, one of their newer ships. The serial number is VRC2-10013."

"Thank you, Mr Sulu, you may resume your post at the helm."

Spock, who had moved quickly to his station, turned and in his most neutral manner, informed Kirk, "The engines have been shut down, but since there are no detectable signs of external damage, the problem must be internal and localised."

Gazing upon the sleek black wedge of the Vulcan cruiser, Kirk requested, "Lt Uhura, open a hailing frequency please."

"Aye, sir, opening now." After a brief pause Uhura said, "Contact established, Captain."

An ageless Vulcan appeared on the main screen, replacing the slick black image of his ship. He could have been 40, he could have been 140. His sharp ears hugged the sides of his head. His hair was the same glossy black as Spock's. His eyes were very deeply set, very black and unreadable. His face was long, his cheek bones high, his nose narrow and his lips thin. His build was athletic rather than powerful and his overall appearance was rather angular and aristocratic.

"Greetings. I am Sydon, Captain of this vessel, the Pa'llyeon."

"Greetings, Captain Sydon, I am Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. Are you in need of assistance?"

"Enterprise," Sydon repeated softly. "Is your First Officer a Vulcan named Spock?"

Kirk confirmed, "Yes, that's correct."

Sydon's expression shifted subtly and the Captain could not quite decide if it now conveyed satisfaction or something less positive. In a curious voice, Kirk repeated, "Are you in need of assistance?" as he inclined his head questioningly in Spock's direction. The First Officer sat, arms folded, wearing his most inscrutable expression. Spock's attention shifted slowly from the main screen back to his Captain, whose gaze he met with a raised and enquiring eyebrow.

"We... thank you... for the offer of assistance," Sydon said hesitantly like a man venturing into a foreign language, which, when Kirk came to think of it, Human courtesy probably was to a Vulcan. "We have experienced an engine malfunction and are effecting repairs. These repairs are progressing satisfactorily so we do not require your assistance."

Kirk looked thoughtfully into Sydon's closed face. He had no intention of leaving a crippled ally ship to fend for herself. "Captain Sydon, please permit me to offer your ship protection until your repairs are completed. We are on a routine border patrol and

have plenty of time to spare."

Sydon's face turned rather blank and Kirk could almost see the wheels of logic turning. It was illogical to accept protection when there was no discernible threat, but the new frontier borders were a lonely wilderness of stars where the possibility of danger was ever present. Therefore, it was good insurance to accept Federation protection.

"We accept your offer, Captain," the Vulcan decided and added awkwardly, "would you and your officers care to dine with us this evening?"

Kirk smiled and regarded Spock with a sideways glance. "We accept with pleasure."

Sydon nodded. He cut a stark figure with his dark eyes and hair and sharply tailored black uniform being relieved only by the pallor of his expressionless face. "We dine at 1900 hours, if that is acceptable?"

"Yes, thank you, Captain," Kirk concluded.

Sydon nodded again and the screen went blank.

At 1850 hours, Kirk, Spock, Scott, Uhura, Sulu, Chekov and Chapel assembled in the transporter room. Dr McCoy had declined the dinner invitation, saying he was too busy. He was evasive and polite about it and Kirk knew something was cooking; he could smell a rat - still, it might only have been that McCoy wanted to give Chris Chapel more experience.

All the available Enterprise officers were turned out in full dress uniform and looked very impressive. They stepped into the transporter and the Captain directed the young Ensign at the controls, "Energise."

Christine Chapel experienced tingling and a sense of vagueness as her vision briefly blurred, then cleared. She looked out upon the Vulcan ship in genuine surprise. She had expected a Spartan darkness - a stark, close rudeness of design. Instead she found light and space and understated simplicity. The air was decidedly warmer, but its slightly higher oxygen content made it easy to breathe. It was filled with the fresh green smell of growing plants and this was pleasant to the mind and to the lungs.

Captain Sydon and his officers stood to attention as the Enterprise officers stepped from the transporter platform. Then Sydon moved forward and raised his hand in greeting. "Welcome to the Pa'lyeon."

"We are honoured," Kirk responded, saluting with equal formality. "Allow me to present my officers. This is Mr Spock, my First Officer."

Spock raised his hand in Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper," he intoned.

Sydon's dark eyes rested on Spock and held his gaze for a long and somehow disturbing moment. Chris Chapel felt an uneasiness that she instantly put down to the differences in Vulcan body language.

"Live long and prosper," Sydon formally returned the salute.

The remaining introductions went more quickly although the only name Chapel could clearly remember at the end was that of Sydon's First Officer, Michhaelu, for it was the only name lacking a characteristic "s" sound.

In person, Sydon was a man of mature years. There was a little grey in his hair and a quality of experience in his manner that elicited respect.

In comparison, Michhaelu was young, almost youthful, with a puckish face and eyes that would have smiled on anyone else but a Vulcan.

Christine Chapel reflected on the fact that Vulcans are as individual in appearance as Humans; it is only their carefully controlled emotions that gives them the illusion of sameness - an illusion which dissipates upon close contact.

Captain Kirk, ever the diplomat, recalled the names of his Vulcan hosts quite clearly and kept up with Sydon what was, for a Vulcan, a lively conversation all the way to the Captain's table.

Scotty took to the Pa'lyeon's Chief Engineer like an energy surge to a photon torpedo. Curiously the Vulcan, with a name full of Ss that Chapel had no hope of remembering, seemed as thoroughly enthusiastic about his job as did Scotty - in a very serious and sedate sort of way, of course.

As they walked through the long, deserted corridors, Chapel became aware of the predominance of white in the ship's decor. Spock was conversing quietly with Michhaelu in the Vulcan tongue, Sulu was talking respectfully with the Pa'lyeon's Senior Helmsman, while Chekov was trying to convince a baffled Vulcan that Buddhism, the closest Earth parallel to Vulcan mysticism, originated in Russia. Uhura was following this with much amusement until her companion, the Chief Communications Officer, a Vulcan woman of mature years and sedate bearing, asked for clarification of Chekov's statements, which did not correspond with her knowledge of the subject. Uhura, looking decidedly uncomfortable, hastily diverted to the safer ground of recent developments in the communications field. Chekov's egocentricities could be embarrassing. It would be difficult to explain that his interpretation of historical facts could often be coloured by patriotism and that he was not wilfully distorting the truth, but that, nevertheless, the actual truth was not being told.

Chapel made a mental note to avoid Chekov, who appeared to be in particularly fine form. In spite of herself she felt a little left out, for no medical personnel were in the official welcoming party, an omission which Sydon explained was due to "an experiment reaching a crucial phase." That sounded damned strange to Chris Chapel and she knew, by the look in her Captain's eye, and even that of Spock, that it sounded peculiar to both of them, but etiquette precluded further enquiry.

Kirk and Sydon, still engaged in polite conversation, turned into the Captain's dining room and Chapel, following in their footsteps, almost gasped in surprise. Desert flowers, both bold and delicate, burst and fell from a narrow channel encircling the room two metres above the floor. Their first scent was heavy - a clean overpowering reminder of blue skies and fierce sunshine. The whole

party pulled up abruptly.

"Please be seated." Sydon gestured towards the circular table.

Kirk quickly collected himself. "Thank you," he said, pulling out a chair for Chris Chapel. "I compliment you on the flowers. We have them in hydroponics, but not in such abundance."

Sydon's dark eyes moved slowly from Kirk to Spock as he replied, "We Vulcans, being vegetarian, feel a great affinity for plants. Their presence reminds us of our heritage."

"They are also very pleasant," Chris Chapel commented as she sat down. "Thank you, sir." Kirk smiled and put her at her ease.

Sydon listened politely, but Chapel could see she had just made a meaningless statement as far as he was concerned. What she had meant was that plants are psychologically therapeutic because they are a tangible reminder of home, but she did not like to suggest that Vulcans needed psychological reinforcement and security just like Humans; it would have been an insult to them.

Captain Kirk sat on Chris Chapel's right and Michhaelu on her left.

"Pleasant," Sydon mused as he seated himself beside Kirk. "To keep plants for pleasure serves no logical purpose."

Chapel tried to bail herself out with, "I was only speaking from my own relative viewpoint, Sir."

Sydon nodded diplomatically, cast his eyes around the table and, seeing that all were seated, said, "We have prepared Vulcan dishes that we believe will be to your liking."

Young Vulcan midshipmen carried in each of the many courses with all the dignity of accomplished head waiters. Each course was small and delicious, though definitely strange to the Human palate. There was a dish that resembled a pale blue sponge which melted and tingled in the mouth like sherbet, yet its taste was like broccoli - well, not exactly, but that was the closest Chris Chapel could get. There was a tiny square of something pink and quivering that had a salty, fishy taste, but of course Vulcans do not eat fish. There was a small bowl of what looked like vegetable soup and yet its taste was indescribably delicious and could not be likened to anything Chapel had ever eaten before. And this was just the beginning. Sarti, an effervescent Vulcan wine, was served liberally. It was powerful, and although Chapel sipped, rather than drank it, her palate was slowly blunted and her head began to swim. That was the point at which she wisely decided to stop drinking and, after a half hour or so, her senses returned. This was half way through the evening and there were still four courses to come, not counting dessert. Captain Kirk and Spock of course sipped their Sarti sparingly. Both appeared perfectly sober and composed, though the same could not be said for Chekov and especially not for Scott, who was extolling the virtues of frequency dilithium crystals with feverish enthusiasm, but his Vulcan colleague did not seem to find this at all "illogical" and listened attentively.

Initially, Chapel had tried to follow what Spock and Michhaelu were saying, but her Vulcan was so poor, and their speech so rapid, that she soon gave it up and turned her attention to Captains Sydon and Kirk. In the early stages of the evening Kirk did a little

fishing, trying to find out the nature of the Vulcans' "engine trouble". Every enquiry produced an unsatisfactory answer which diverted the conversation to more trivial subjects. Chapel surmised that Sydon's hedging was for reasons of Vulcan security - perhaps they were testing a new type of drive. Curiously, Sydon was quite interested in Chapel and asked her many questions about her background and role within the Starfleet Medical Corps. When the evening drew to a close, she had developed a personal liking for the man.

Dessert finally arrived and consisted of tiny berries that popped and spilled tangy nectar in the mouth.

Just when Chapel was sure she would burst, the dinner was over and coffee was served - real coffee, steaming and aromatic. The Vulcans traded vigorously with many planets, including Earth, and this coffee was Brazil's finest, if Chris Chapel was any judge.

The evening had been long and quite remarkably pleasant. The Vulcans, despite their stoic ways, were attentive hosts and in conversation were stimulating and engaging, despite their logic and its profound and often baffling influence on their thinking and behaviour.

Jim Kirk drained his cup. "I can't remember the last time I had such a delicious dinner." He cast his eyes promptly around the table.

Chris Chapel agreed easily. "Yes, thank you, Captain Sydon, it's been an honour and a pleasure."

Kirk smiled approvingly as his other officers followed Chapel's lead, but frowned a little when Scotty concluded thickly, "Aye, delicious!" in a too-loud voice. The Captain made a mental note to have a quiet chat with his Chief Engineer when they returned to the Enterprise.

But the evening was not over, for the respective conversations continued for another hour. Spock and Michhaelu conducted theirs in the sharp yet somehow musical Vulcan tongue, whilst Chapel reflected on what an unexpected affair dinner had been. It was not usual at formal functions for such a relaxed atmosphere to prevail. Perhaps it was the calm of the Vulcans that had been the catalyst, for they were not the cold, indifferent beings that people who knew nothing of them assumed. This did not mean that they were jovial or even candid; rather, that Vulcans were creatures of dignity, patience and logic. It was the logic that most Humans had trouble with, probably because its ultimate expression was emotional control, and, as was widely known, Humans believed emotional expression, within reasonable limits, to be vital for good health. Well, that was certainly what Dr McCoy thought and Chapel was of the same opinion, but in her own quiet, and certainly more conservative way.

"Captain Sydon," Kirk said finally, "we thank you and your company for an extremely pleasant evening and hope that we will have the opportunity of returning your hospitality in the near future."

Sydon stood and raised his hand to Kirk in Vulcan salute. "You honour us," he said. Reluctantly, those seated, Vulcan and Human alike, began slowly to rise.

Sydon, who had had very little to say to Spock during the evening, ran his dark eyes speculatively over the First Officer and

spoke to him in Vulcan.

Spock blinked, which Chapel realized was the closest he could get to a gesture of surprise. She kicked herself for not paying attention to what Sydon said; she might have been able to pick up a few words. Her reflexes were quick enough, however, for her to listen closely to Spock's reply, but all she could understand was what could have translated into "to serve" but she wasn't sure.

Sydon's eyes were strangely veiled as he turned to Kirk, saying, "Captain, we will take approximately forty hours to effect our repairs and, since you do not intend going anywhere during that time, I would like to request your permission to have Mr Spock spend some time with us."

Kirk was taken aback, but his easy smile stayed in place. He waited a moment then, realizing that a reason for this request was not going to be forthcoming, he replied, "Certainly, Captain Sydon, Mr Spock has my permission to remain on board."

This was a strange and exhilarating development and one that Chapel had not counted upon. It hinted at many things of a sensitive nature to Vulcans, and yet a voice in the back of Chapel's mind reminded her that Vulcans were creatures of logic. But how was she ever going to know?

"Captain Sydon," she blurted, "as a physician, I would like to ask permission to stay and speak to your medical officers and learn more of Vulcan physiology."

It certainly was not diplomatic, let alone good manners, to invite herself, but Chapel did not want to let an opportunity like this slip by.

Sydon's passive expression did not betray reluctance, but Chapel sensed that he would have liked to refuse her, then realised that to do so would have meant revealing, or hinting at, his motive for asking Spock to remain on board. He was also well aware that Kirk watched him more closely than his mild expression suggested.

"Yes," Sydon decided. "If that is your wish Nurse Chapel, then you are welcome to stay."

"Thank you, Captain," Kirk said and smilingly added, "I apologise for my officer's lack of tact, but it is a good opportunity for her to learn."

Kirk's gaze moved curiously to Spock, whose face was composed and at its most inscrutable. "Well, gentlemen," he said to his remaining officers. "It's getting late."

A half hour later, Chapel and Spock were escorted down a wide corridor, deep inside the Pallyeon, by a young midshipman who was, by Chapel's standards, exotically beautiful. Spock and the feline young woman, whose name was Tessara, were conversing softly in the swift Vulcan tongue. Chapel knew something was going on and her exclusion from the present conversation made her doubly impatient to know exactly what. She didn't have to wait long.

"Nurse Chapel," Spock said gravely, "as you have probably deduced, there is more than engine trouble on this ship."

"Yes," Chapel replied levelly, "I'd gathered that."

The young midshipman, Tessara, stopped before a large door with discreet Vulcan lettering upon it. Chapel couldn't cope with the spoken language, let alone its written form. "Where are we?" she asked, feeling uneasy for the first time.

Spock spoke briefly to Tessara and she moved quietly away. He raised his hand to the door's clearance panel and said, "This is sick bay."

Chapel was trying to absorb this revelation when the door opened on a chaotic scene.

Captain Sydon was there closeted in deep conversation with two Vulcan surgeons who were the calm centre of a quite remarkable storm. In the glassed-off sick bay ward beyond this outer office all the beds were occupied, and temporary ones littered the floor. Chapel was shocked - an epidemic was the last thing she had expected.

Sydon looked up as they came in. He strode across the room to meet them. "Dr Chapel," he said, dispensing with the Starfleet rating of 'Nurse', "you have placed me in a dilemma regarding security. I would have preferred only Spock to remain, but you left me no choice, so I must appeal to your hippocratic oath, which I believe transcends any oath to Starfleet." His black eyes held Chapel accountable.

"It is vital to Vulcan security that no non-Vulcans learn of our susceptibility to the mutated virus causing the epidemic you are witnessing." Sydon's voice and manner softened, "I mean no disrespect to your Captain, his crew, or Starfleet, but I have taken the only logical steps possible to preserve our security."

"What's the problem?" Chapel asked as evenly as she could but making no promises.

Sydon's attention moved to Spock. "The problem is a virulent mutation of the Rigellian Fever virus. The unmutated virus is contagious only among Humans, but this mutated form is contagious and particularly virulent to us. We believe we picked it up from the Human colony on Prorama VI, and if our conclusions are correct the mutated form of the virus does not exhibit symptoms in Humans, but can be carried and transmitted by them. As you can appreciate, this puts us in a very vulnerable position."

Chapel looked from Sydon to Spock. Suddenly, and with great clarity, she understood exactly what was going on. "You want to use Spock to cultivate a vaccine. You want to administer the virus and have the Human half of his genetic makeup respond with the necessary antibodies, and the Vulcan half to modify and accept these."

A voice spoke softly behind Chapel. "Yes, Dr Chapel, that is the procedure we intend performing."

Chapel swung around.

"Allow me to introduce Dr Sianas," Sydon said with quiet formality.

Chapel blinked, for the name was more than just familiar to her. Dr Sianas was a leader in the field of Vulcan immunology. It was quite appropriate to find her practising on a Vulcan research vessel of the Pa'llyeon's calibre. It was also a stroke of very good

luck.

Dr Sianas raised her strong yet slender hand in Vulcan salute, "Welcome, Spock, Dr Chapel. I must request your full co-operation."

Spock formally returned the salute and intoned, "The good of the many transcends the needs of the one." He folded his arms emotionlessly and waited.

Dr Sianas turned her full attention to Chapel. "I understand you have more experience than your Starfleet rank suggests, so although we would have preferred to keep this matter strictly among Vulcans, we ask your full assistance now that you are here."

Chapel took in Dr Sianas' imposing appearance in a single long look. The Vulcan doctor was equally as tall as Spock. Her face was sharp featured and yet her eyes were almost warm, for she belonged to that rare 3% of Vulcans possessing the recessive gene which resulted in grey eyes. Sianas was not young, her presence conveyed her strength and the experience it was based upon.

Looking directly into the very intelligent face of her colleague, Chris Chapel made a conscious effort not to swallow as she committed herself with, "I will, of course, do all that I can to help, but please explain your situation more fully."

"Our situation is grave. As you are no doubt aware, the Rigellian virus produces short-lived fever in Humans, but its mutated form in Vulcans causes delirium and a high fever which is proving impossible to break. We have no immunity to it once infected and are forestalling its full onset, in those still unaffected, with massive doses of antibiotics. We are also using concentrated antibiotics to try and stabilise our advanced cases, but we are slowly losing this battle. For your part, Dr Chapel, it is highly improbable that you will contract the virus, but if you do you will be non-contagious to other Humans unless the virus undergoes a regressive mutation within your system."

Chapel nodded her agreement and went to the heart of the matter. "How long till your whole crew is infected?"

"The probability is estimated at 27.16 hours," Sianas replied, Vulcan calm.

"We'd better get started."

They began. Step one was to give Spock a complete physical. Step two was to inject him with a concentrated form of the virus to speed up his reaction. Step three was to isolate him and wait. Chapel worked closely with Dr Sianas.

The virus, which had undergone a virulent mutation in its Human host on Prorama VI, was soon to prove fatal to Vulcans. A gaunt young doctor hurried to Sianas's side and after a brief exchange Sianas turned to Chapel and said quietly, "We have lost our first patient, Dr Chapel. Will you assist me with the autopsy?"

Chapel felt the colour drain from her face. Despite her medical background she had not admitted to herself that death was a possibility, even for Spock with his half Human system. But the virus had reached plague proportions - one look into the sick bay, overcrowded with writhing, fever-ridden Vulcans no longer responding to treatment, confirmed the facts. The medical team and essential

personnel were receiving regular massive doses of broad-spectrum antibiotics and were suffering fatigue, but no fever so far. The only problem was that these drugs were dangerous in themselves, if used over prolonged periods of time.

The autopsy was a grim business. The patient had died from a brain haemorrhage. They already knew the virus had an anti-coagulating effect on Vulcan blood and were treating it with coagulants which were having little noticeable effect.

While Chapel and Sianas completed the autopsy, Spock lay in a surgery set up especially for research in just such an emergency as this. The fever was upon him within an hour of the virus being administered.

Two hours later, Drs Sianas and Chapel left caring for the crew to the rest of the Vulcan medical team. Spock was at a suitable stage of contagion for them to begin coaxing his immune system into producing potent antibodies. Chapel felt sick at heart to see him so ill, even though she realized he was the only hope the Vulcans had of finding a cure. Spock, himself, struggled to remain unaltered in manner and felt that it was quite logical for him to help with the research. Dr Sianas, aware that rationality was slipping from him, explained firmly that it was illogical to speed up the progress of his illness by moving about, especially considering that immunology was not a specialty of his. Chapel almost smiled at this - it was the first time she had ever seen Spock checkmated with logic.

In compromise, Spock lay with a computer readout screen above him and followed the progress of their work. He was dressed in white pyjamas and, before the hour was through, these were saturated with perspiration.

Spock had achieved a very advanced level of mind control and so, in spite of his increasing fever, he managed not to slip into delirium for a further hour. Chapel came to him often and lowered the temperature field of his bed to the point where a Human would have been very cold.

"It seems, Dr Chapel, that I am showing an above average resistance to this virus."

Chapel looked into Spock's black, fever-glazed eyes and smiled as reassuringly as she could manage. "Yes, Spock, you are doing very well." She did not add that their attempts so far to boost the Human factors in his immune system had been unsuccessful. Spock was slipping deeper into fever, and unless they came up with something fast his life would soon be in jeopardy. And it was an extremely valuable life, not only personally to Chapel, but to the Vulcan race so gravely in need of the vaccine that only Spock's hybrid system could provide in time to save the Pa'lyeon, now a plague ship.

Readouts and probability curves, in both Vulcan and Standard, played across the screens of the medical computers. Dr Sianas' manner was solemn, even for a Vulcan. Chapel was worried, extremely worried. In another three hours she would have to report routinely back to the Enterprise, as would Spock, but she knew, with a sick, sinking feeling, that Spock might not even be alive at that time. She felt like a fragile bird caught in a hurricane.

Feeling helpless, Chapel sat by Spock and prayed that his immune system would respond in time to their treatments and the

virus itself. She drew the wet black hair back from his face and held his hand. Spock didn't even notice. He could no longer stop his vision from doubling and his mind from wandering. He was distantly aware that delirium was finally setting in and that he could no longer fight it off. He clung to this rational thought like a shipwrecked man on a lonely rock in the middle of a storm-raging sea, but waves of other thoughts swept over him.

He was very young, no more than two years old, when he heard his mother's soft crying - a private, painful sound that he had not been meant to hear. He toddled from his small bed and afternoon nap, and came to his mother's side. "Why are you crying?" he asked in his small child's voice.

His mother, her face wet with tears, turned slowly. Hurriedly wiping her cheeks with trembling hands, she forced a smile. "I just feel sad today, darling."

Spock's smooth young brow furrowed seriously. "Why are you sad?" he asked with the persistence that was to characterise his life.

Amanda, wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. "I'm crying for you, baby; you will soon enter training in the Vulcan disciplines and you will be taken from me - and also from yourself."

Spock could feel the beat of his mother's heart, the reassuring warmth of her skin, the light perfume of her hair, and they were pain to him, a memory of simpler times when his emotions came naturally and without censorship and suppression.

"Captain," Mr Sulu said, turning from Spock's Science Station where he was relieving, "I just ran a routine sensor scan on maximum range and I think I picked up something."

Captain Kirk turned curiously in his chair and said, "Something? Please be more specific, Mr Sulu."

Sulu cleared his throat. "It appears to be an enormous artefact, and there are smaller objects following it that also seem artificial."

"Are they close enough for an image?"

"No, sir, but I can bring up a computer enhancement."

"Thank you, Mr Sulu, that'll do nicely. On main screen when you're ready."

The Captain turned his attention to his Communications Officer, "Lieutenant Uhura, are you getting anything?"

"I'm running a maximum range scan, sir." Uhura's fingers played efficiently across her instruments for a few moments. Eventually she reported, "No communications, no anomalies, sir."

Kirk frowned and rubbed thoughtfully at his chin.

"Computer enhancement on main screen," Sulu said as their view of space and the Vulcan ship Pa'lyeon vanished, to be replaced with an image of the bizarre.

The Captain leaned forward in his command chair. His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. At the centre of the main viewer was the hazy image of an enormous mythological creature.

Kirk broke the astonished silence that had settled over the bridge by ordering in a cool and collected voice, "Rotate, please, Mr Sulu."

"Rotating, sir."

The hazy computer enhancement began to revolve slowly. There was a definite head, with the sharp features and long pointed ears of a jackal. This was balanced on what appeared to be a long and slender neck, and below this the body took on a bat-like appearance with outstretched arms joined to the body and legs by scintillating webbing. Behind this unbelievable image there were many flecks of undefined shape that the computer had coloured in the same neutral green as the jackal figure.

Decisively, Kirk pressed one of the controls on his armrest. "Captain to crew. A maximum sensor scan has revealed a series of unknown artefacts approaching us from deep space; no contact has been made. Stand by."

"Mr Sulu, run a computer search for nearest likeness on the main object, please."

Sulu's face set with determined concentration. "Yes, sir." On the one hand he was pleased to be tested in the Science Officer's post, but on the other, Spock was not an easy man to live up to. Sulu's hands danced across his keyboard. "Checking now."

The soft hush of the bridge doors parting briefly distracted Kirk. He swung a little in his chair and confronted Dr McCoy. "You're on stand-by, Doctor; you should be at your station."

McCoy's full attention was on the main screen. If he heard his Captain he didn't acknowledge the fact. Instead, he demanded, "What the hell's that?"

An exasperated expression passed across Jim Kirk's face. McCoy could take discipline when he saw the sense of it, but those occasions were the exception rather than the norm. With any other Captain the Doctor would have been up on charges on more than one occasion, but Kirk recognised that although he wore a Starfleet uniform, McCoy was not a military man. He was a damned good Doctor, even if inclined to be a law unto himself.

"Lt Uhura, please raise Captain Sydon on the Pa'llyeon and transmit our computer enhancement."

"Aye, sir."

A few seconds later Captain Sydon's image appeared on the left half of the main screen. Kirk was immediately struck by his strained appearance. He put his surprise at that carefully aside and said, "Captain Sydon, the split screen image you're receiving is a computer enhancement of a series of objects approaching us from deep space. They are still too far away for our sensors to detect anything more than their presence, course and general shape. Could you please scan for them. Your sensors may be more sensitive than ours."

Sydon looked from the image of Kirk on one half of his main screen to the strange, winged jackal-like image and its entourage on the other. He turned his head slightly to one side and nodded to his Science Officer to initiate a long-range scan. Sydon said, "Scanning, Captain Kirk. Stand by to receive our transmission."

Kirk turned to Sulu. "Cut the computer enhancement please, Mr Sulu."

"Aye, sir." The half of the main screen which contained the computer enhancement blackened. Seconds later the transmission from the Vulcan research vessel filled this brief void. A powerful image shone forth and the information printed out below it in Standard.

The Vulcans confirmed that it was a real image not a computer enhancement. Staring hard, Kirk was as shocked at the sensitivity of the Vulcan sensors as he was at the objects they were detecting. There was a frozen moment in which everyone on the Bridge watched the screen incredulously. Most fantastic of all was the largest object, which measured more than six kilometres in length and nine in breadth from wing tip to wing tip. At its thickest, its diameter was more than two kilometres. The object was self illuminated with a golden jackal-like head whose upswept ears were lined with rose gold and whose eyes were bright emerald. The bat-like body was yellow gold, but its wings were a bubbly scintillation of rose gold webbing with points that seemed to be constantly shifting their fire.

"Captain." Sulu interrupted Kirk's astonished concentration, "Our closest computer match is an extinct type of bat known as a flying fox, which was indigenous to Australasia until the early 2060s."

Kirk turned briefly to his Acting Science Officer. "Thank you, Mr Sulu, please transmit that information in full to the Pa'llyeon."

"Aye, Captain."

"Well, one thing's for sure, that out there sure as hell isn't a bat."

Kirk swung to find McCoy still standing behind him. He killed any further comments from the Doctor with a reprimanding glare.

"It is our consensus that the small objects following the artefact are spacecraft," Captain Sydon was saying as the Captain turned back towards the screen.

Kirk scrutinised the much vaguer, faintly gold shapes of the objects following the huge artefact and, reading their dimensions and the size of their internal cavities, said, "Yes, agreed, Captain Sydon. Have you any records on anything of this nature?"

"No, no records, although we do confirm the extinct indigenous Earth bat known as a flying fox, but it is highly improbable that this has any relevance."

"Agreed," Kirk said, adding thoughtfully, "this definitely comes from outside the Federation."

Sydon nodded acknowledgement of that fact.

Holding the Vulcan's unreadable eyes, Kirk asked, "Captain, how

much longer till you complete your repairs?"

The set of Sydon's features shifted subtly with evasion. "Our repairs involve the stripping and rebuilding of an engine. This work is still more than thirty-four hours away from completion and has involved the closing down of all propulsion systems."

"I see," Kirk remarked, gratified to have at least a vague idea of the Pa'lyeon's difficulties. He didn't press for more information; he knew he'd now been given all he was going to get. The Pa'lyeon was a new ship and, as her long-range sensor scan revealed, she had many valuable secrets in new technology to protect.

"The alien artefact and the spacecraft following it will intercept with us in less than twenty-seven hours," Kirk stated. "I think you are aware that we are duty bound to stay with you and lend you our protection, should it prove to be necessary, until your repairs are completed."

Sydon's brow furrowed. He knew Kirk's responsibilities in circumstances such as these, and of course, considering Spock's current role on board the Pa'lyeon, the Enterprise's continuing presence was an unavoidable necessity. Nevertheless, Sydon realized the longer his medical emergency lasted, the greater the chances of a security breach, all of which made the approaching unknowns doubly threatening.

"Yes, Captain Kirk," Sydon acknowledged with darkly veiled eyes and an unreadable expression, "I am aware of your responsibilities in a situation of this nature."

Kirk saw the strain behind the words and deliberately composed face of his colleague and wondered with greater interest and urgency just exactly what was going on on board the Pa'lyeon. He decided to do some fishing. "Captain Sydon, I think that in these circumstances, Mr Spock and Nurse Chapel should return to the Enterprise."

Kirk's instincts didn't fail him. Sydon fixed his face into its most inscrutable lines. "Mr Spock has fallen ill. Nurse Chapel is with him in sick bay."

"What's wrong with him?" McCoy demanded, stepping hastily down to his Captain's side.

"Please forgive the insubordination of my Chief Medical Officer," Kirk requested levelly, "and have Nurse Chapel report to me as soon as possible."

"Certainly, Captain."

"Kirk out."

Jim Kirk's voice was low and icy. "Dr McCoy, I'll speak with you in my quarters."

McCoy opened his mouth to protest, but was silenced by, "Don't push me, Bones."

A heavy silence fell over the bridge, which the Captain broke with, "Lt Uhura, advise Starfleet of our current circumstances."

"Aye, sir."

"And have Nurse Chapel's transmission patched through to my quarters when it comes in."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk threw open the internal communications channel on his armrest controls and spoke to the crew. "We have not identified the artefact or spacecraft approaching us from deep space but, since we can detect no immediate threat, stand down."

The bridge atmosphere relaxed a little. The Captain stood, ordering, "Mr Sulu, you have the Con."

Chris Chapel's lengthy interview with Captain Sydon left her in an extremely uncomfortable position. It was carefully explained to her that the Pa'lyeon *did* have serious and crippling engine problems which had arisen when a fever-afflicted engineer, the first person to fall ill, made a miscalculation whilst draining a negative static build up from the dilithium core of their main engine. Within minutes, his serious error had caused the crystals to become unstable and to fracture. The solution was to close down all engines immediately, then strip the damaged engine to reach and replace its core, and then to rebuild it and safety check all the work. This labour-intensive and time-consuming task was made doubly difficult by the fever which was now affecting a full two thirds of the crew in varying degrees.

Captain Sydon went on to explain the approach of the mysterious artefact and its flotilla of craft, and Captain Kirk's subsequent request for the return of his officers.

Chapel understood her Captain's reasons for wanting her and Spock to return, but knew they could not do so while Spock was still so ill. Besides this, if the virus mutated regressively in Spock's system there was the possibility of infection to the Enterprise crew in spite of full isolation and decontamination procedures. But, most importantly, there was the urgent need to keep knowledge of the mutated virus and its lethal effects on Vulcans to an absolute minimum. Chapel trusted Enterprise security, but she did *not* entirely trust the security of Starfleet H.Q.; there had been some embarrassing leaks to the Klingon Empire in recent years, and Chapel knew that, once informed of the situation on board the Pa'lyeon, Captain Kirk would be duty bound to report back to his superiors. Chapel was protected from any such duty by her hippocratic oath and reluctantly, for the first time in her Star-fleet career, she was putting this responsibility ahead of her duty.

Finally, deciding to tell the truth but not the whole truth, Chris Chapel sat before the communications console in Dr Sianas' private quarters. When her call was patched through to Captain Kirk, who was in his quarters with Dr McCoy, she could see that neither of them was in the mood to accept anything other than the full truth. She swallowed uncomfortably as Kirk asked in a firm, cool voice, "Why did you not advise me immediately when Mr Spock fell ill?"

"I wished first to confirm the nature of the illness, Captain."

"And have you done so?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Spock has Rigellian Fever." Chapel carefully omitted the fact that he actually had a mutated version of the virus contagious only among Vulcans.

"And when did you ascertain this fact?" Kirk's eyes were dark and hard. He was very angry and very concerned.

"I'm not sure, sir, but certainly I should have contacted you by now."

"And what distracted you from this duty?"

Chapel felt flustered; the Captain's unblinking eyes seemed to be looking right through her. "I've been working with Dr Sianas on Mr Spock's case and time got away from me," she managed.

McCoy interrupted with, "Sianas, the immunologist?"

"Yes, she's very interested in Mr Spock."

"I bet she is," was McCoy's cryptic response.

Kirk turned his full attention on his Chief Medical Officer. "What do you mean by that, Bones?"

"Jim, Dr Sianas is a leading Vulcan immunologist. She's highly respected and extremely competent. Spock couldn't be in better hands."

"And, as a leading researcher in her field, she couldn't help but be fascinated by a Human-Vulcan hybrid like Spock?"

"It sounds a bit cold and clinical, but that's the gist of it," McCoy agreed.

Broodingly, Jim Kirk turned back to Chapel, "What is Mr Spock's current condition?"

"We expect his fever to break within the next few hours," she said truthfully, not adding that if it didn't he'd be dead.

Kirk sighed. "All right, in the interests of maintaining good relations with our Vulcan colleagues, you and Mr Spock had best stay on board the Pa'lyeon until his fever breaks."

Turning to McCoy, the Captain queried, "Any objections?"

McCoy, who had already received a dressing down for his presence and behaviour on the bridge, said quietly, "No objections. I'd just like to know where and how he picked up a case of Rigellian Fever."

"Any ideas?" Kirk asked Chapel, watching her closely.

With as composed a face and manner as she could muster, Chapel told her first lie. "No, sir, none."

Jim Kirk's tone became very official. "I'll expect a full report when this matter is concluded and I'll expect all my questions to be addressed in full."

Chapel responded uneasily. "Yes, sir."

"In the meantime, I'll expect hourly reports, is that clear?"

"Very clear, sir."

"Good."

"Keptin," Chekov said, turning reflectively from his position at the helm, "et could be Siberian hoss."

Kirk actually suppressed a smile. "I think you're referring to the Trojan Horse of Greek myth, aren't you, Mr Chekov?"

Chekov was about to argue the point, but seeing his Captain's gaze sharpen, decided not to.

Mildly, Kirk added, "I think if you project the current course of the objects you'll find no planetfalls."

For some minutes Chekov busied himself at this task. Eventually he confirmed what Kirk had already checked, through his computer console, while in his quarters. "No, Keptin, there are no plenetfalls."

"Thank you, Mr Chekov, it was a worthy premise." Looking from his Navigator to the bridge crew in general, Kirk invited, "If any of you get any ideas about what those objects are and where they're going and why, I want to hear them, no matter how wild and far fetched."

There was an uncomfortable silence which Uhura broke with, "Captain, the head of the artefact does remind me of the head of an ancient Egyptian God, known as Anubis."

Kirk turned questioningly to Uhura. "Anubis?"

"Yes, sir, the jackal-headed god of embalming."

"Uhura, you may have something. It could be religious."

The Communications Officer, feeling a little more sure of herself, concluded, "I was wondering if it could be some sort of pilgrimage?"

The Captain nodded. "An interesting possibility, Lieutenant."

In the research surgery of the Pa'llyeon sick bay, Dr Chapel used the oldest of her healing arts when she pressed a cold compress to Spock's burning brow.

Chapel had just reported to Captain Kirk that his First Officer's condition was stable but unchanged. She had not described the extent of his delirium or her gnawing anxiety at his immune system's failure to respond to Dr Sianas' efforts to boost its Human factors.

The situation on the Pa'llyeon was grave. Nearly all the crew was ill, even Captain Sydon experiencing the first effects of fever. Dr Sianas was still unaffected, thanks to the dangerously large doses of antibiotics that she and her staff were taking, but it was

only a matter of time before they, too, became ill.

Alone in his office, Dr McCoy sat brooding over Spock's medical records. The Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer had just confirmed what he already knew. Although Spock had been exposed to Rigellian Fever several years ago, he had never contracted the disease, for which there was no immunization, and tests to determine if the virus was lying dormant in his hybrid system had been negative. Rigellian Fever had an extremely short incubation period and only infected Humans, so it was not surprising that, as a half Vulcan, Spock had been immune. In addition to this, the possibility of a carrier on board the Enterprise seemed very remote, for three-monthly medical checks were a part of shipboard routine and McCoy knew his staff was very thorough. If there was a carrier on board, the medical staff would have picked it up. That left only one other possible source of contagion - the Pa'lyeon, but, as McCoy well knew, Vulcans were immune to Rigellian Fever. This left the Doctor to draw the only possible conclusion - the virus had mutated into a form which *did* infect Vulcans and hence Spock had contracted the disease whilst on board the Vulcan ship.

McCoy's eyes were very blue and very troubled as he realized Chris Chapel had not fully briefed her Captain, but had, instead, honoured her first responsibility as a doctor - her hippocratic oath.

From all of this, the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer drew one final and very disturbing conclusion - the Pa'lyeon was a plague ship fighting to keep a deadly secret.

"Dammit!" McCoy cursed out loud as he realized Spock could die and Chapel's career in Starfleet could be over.

Dr Sianas turned from analysis of the latest blood sample she had taken from Spock. "Dr Chapel," she said quietly.

"Yes?" Chris Chapel looked anxiously up from Spock's bedside.

"The antibodies have strengthened and their build-up is increasing."

Chapel looked back to Spock, who still moaned with fever, but who had calmed down noticeably over the last forty minutes. "It's working?"

"Yes," Dr Sianas agreed in a weary, relieved voice. "I shall start cloning the antibodies."

"How long till you have enough to vaccinate?"

Sianas gazed off into space as her exhausted mind attempted to grapple with this vital question. Finally she said, "Another two hours."

"Then you're going to lose more people?"

"Yes, Dr Chapel."

Chapel nodded. Tears of grief and frustration sprang to her

eyes as Dr Sianas hurried away to work on production of the precious vaccine.

Captain Kirk was in conference with his officers when, an hour later, Nurse Chapel reported that Mr Spock's fever had broken and that they could return to the ship within another two to three hours.

This news sent a perceptible sigh of relief around the conference table.

Leaving it to Dr McCoy to arrange for his First Officer's return, and any decontamination procedures necessary, Kirk turned his full attention to the problem in hand.

"Mr Scott, it's interesting to know that these small spacecraft are of an unknown design and that possibly they have atomic fusion engines, but I want facts - and if you can't give me facts then I want probabilities."

"Ye canna get blood oot o' a stone," Scotty muttered irritably under his breath.

"Agreed, Mr Scott," Kirk said pointedly, "but you *can* analyse the stone."

Montgomery Scott shifted uncomfortably. His Captain's hearing could be fine-tuned at the worst possible moments. With a self conscious shrug, he conceded, "Aye, sir."

Jim Kirk's hazel eyes briefly followed inner thoughts. His face was troubled as he observed, "All Lt Uhura's attempts at establishing contact have failed and, despite intensive monitoring, no ship to ship contact within the fleet - or whatever it is - has been detected." Kirk's attention focused on his Chief Communications Officer. "Do you have anything more to add, Lieutenant?"

Uhura's feline eyes were dark with apology and weariness, "Only that, although the objects have been within normal sensor range for the past forty minutes, the situation is unchanged." She interlocked her long, slender fingers and added, "The Vulcans confirm no contact and no monitoring of transmissions."

Kirk nodded and turned to Chekov. "Are the ships flying in any sort of formation?"

"No, sir, they're all over the place. There's no patten, not even an unbalanced vun."

"Thank you, Mr Chekov. I want to know immediately if any of the ships change position."

"Of course, sir."

Kirk directed his full attention to his Chief Engineer. "Mr Scott, you are relieved of all other duties. I want more information on those ships. I've spoken with Captain Sydon and he has agreed, despite their engine refit, to let his Chief Engineer work on the problem with you."

Scotty brightened. "Aye, sir."

Leaning back in his chair, Kirk glanced about the conference table. "All right, we've pursued the obvious; now it's time to pursue that which is not obvious."

His officers regarded him with expectant interest; they were definitely open to suggestion.

Kirk rubbed at his chin and was a little surprised to realize he had forgotten to shave - but then again, like most of his officers, he'd also forgotten to sleep. Fixing his gaze upon Acting Science Officer Sulu, he said, "Firstly, I want the artefact checked for uncommon energy emissions or infusions. I want to know if it's affected by anything as likely as light or as far-fetched as solar winds." Seeing a few raised eyebrows, Kirk said, "I know solar winds are almost undetectable out here, but I want it checked anyway. I also want to know if random particles of any type may be relevant." The Captain pressed on with, "I also want spectrum checks for rare alloys done on the artefact and its ships." He raised his hand to silence Mr Scott. "I know it's highly unlikely we'll get any readings, but I want it checked."

Finally, Scott enquired, "Will they Vulcans work fully wi' us on this, sir?"

"I've secured the co-operation of their Chief Engineer and have their Captain's assurance that any important sensor findings will be passed on to us. But as you'll appreciate, Mr Scott, getting the Pa'llyeon operational remains their number one priority right now."

"Aye, sir."

"And," mused Kirk, "considering the new technology on their ship, it will more than likely breach their security to work fully with us. So at this stage, diplomacy dictates that we keep our distance."

Dr McCoy, who had sat silently through most of the conference, folded his arms and fixed his most neutral expression upon his face. He could think of other vital reasons for the Vulcans wanting to keep contact with the Enterprise to a minimum.

"Are there any questions?" Kirk asked.

This was greeted with an uncomfortable silence.

The Captain again rubbed at his chin. "In that case, I want you to put your respective staffs to work on the problems in hand while you all log five hours' sleep."

Before his officers could voice their disagreement, Kirk stated, "That's an order which only excludes Dr McCoy."

"But, sir, there are only twenty-four hours till intercept."

"Thank you, Lt Uhura, I'm well aware of that fact."

"I hope you're including yourself in that order," McCoy said in his drollest voice.

"Yes, Doctor," Kirk acknowledged crisply, "I'm including myself in that order."

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Four hours later, while the Captain was sleeping fitfully in his cabin, Christine Chapel and Mr Spock returned to the Enterprise under full decontamination procedures. Once tucked up in the isolation ward, Spock fell naturally into the deep, exhausted sleep that invariably follows the breaking of a high fever.

Shortly thereafter, even though he could see the heavy toll that stress and fatigue had taken on his colleague, McCoy hurried Chapel through decontamination clearance and into the privacy of his office. "All right, Chris, off the record, what the hell's been going on?"

Chapel looked completely disarmed by his characteristic bluntness. She tried to compose herself, but McCoy cut in with, "Don't try and tell me Spock contracted Rigellian Fever. I've checked his records just in case I'm losing my memory, and there were no dormant traces of the virus in his system and, despite previous exposure, he's always been immune. Considering he's a Vulcan hybrid, that's not all that surprising."

Chapel met her superior's blue, unflinching eyes. She shifted self-consciously.

"Come on," McCoy encouraged quietly. "I'm asking you to talk to me off the record."

Chapel sighed; it was a distressed and defeated sound. "The Vulcans picked up a mutation of Rigellian Fever on Proroma VI. The mutation is carried by Humans, who are unaffected by the disease, but it's highly contagious and fatal to Vulcans. They needed Spock to make a vaccine."

"And did they, Chris?"

"Yes."

McCoy's voice was gentle as he asked, "How many people did they lose to this mutation before they got their vaccine?"

Chapel fought to control her brittle voice as she replied, "Nineteen."

"And how close did Spock get to becoming a statistic?"

"Too close. Far too close."

McCoy scrutinised his colleague with a long and worried look. "Are you going to brief the Captain fully?"

Chapel thought this over for what seemed the thousandth time. She stuck with her original decision. "No, I can't do that."

"Your hippocratic oath?"

Defensively, Chapel replied, "The Captain would have to report the situation back to Starfleet and we both know of the security leaks to the Klingons from inside H.Q. over the last few years."

"And you think if the Klingons get wind of this they'll start working on mutations of other Human-afflicting viruses?"

"Yes," Chapel confirmed, "that's exactly what I think. The Klingons hate the Vulcans. They'd do anything to bring them down."

McCoy nodded. "Starting with eliminating Spock."

Chapel drew back her blonde hair and suppressed the tears that had been threatening, like a storm behind her eyes, ever since this interview began. "Yes, if they were going to wage covert germ warfare on the Vulcans, a vaccine source like Spock would have to be eliminated immediately."

McCoy regarded Chapel with a compromised expression. "All right, Chris, I understand and respect your decision."

"That's the end of it?"

"There's not much else to say, other than get some sleep."

For the first time in what seemed a very long time, Chris Chapel smiled. "Thanks Len. Thanks very much."

An hour later McCoy was switching off the decontamination field around Spock when Kirk walked quietly into the isolation ward. "How is he, Bones?"

Even though Kirk had spoken softly, McCoy held his finger to his lips and, taking his Captain by the arm, steered him out of the room, across the corridor, and into his office.

"Have a seat, Jim." McCoy sat on the opposite side of his desk and lifted a steaming pot of coffee from its warming plate. "I'm sorry to pull you out of there, but Spock can hear a pin drop a kilometre away."

Ignoring this, Kirk patiently repeated, "How is he, Bones?"

"He's fine, Jim. As a matter o' fact, I just switched off the decontamination field; he's not contagious. All he needs is rest."

Kirk looked relieved, but there was a curiously questioning light in his eyes. "I gather you've spoken to Chris."

McCoy casually handed a cup of coffee to his superior. "Yes, Jim, I've spoken to Chris."

"And did she have anything to add to what we already know?"

The Doctor evaded this direct question with, "Just medical stuff, Jim."

The Captain inclined his head a little and carefully met McCoy's veiled eyes. "I've done some interesting reading between the lines, Bones."

"That can put you in an uncomfortable position."

"Yes, Bones, I figured that one out all by myself."

"And?"

Kirk put his coffee carefully to one side. "Ask Chris to make her report short. I'll log it as routine."

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Captain James T. Kirk stood gazing over the shoulder of his Acting Science Officer at a colourful computer screen. Graphs and wave readings followed each other in rapid succession across its flat, recessed surface. Eventually the computer printed, "Conclusion: fossilised bones of an unknown species." The screen cleared and fragmentary images of bone appeared and mixed in random patterns. Within seconds they stabilised into the skeletal outline of a bat-like creature.

Mr Sulu turned to his Captain. "It's not a species of bat, sir. It's more than three metres from wing tip to wing tip and there were once straining filaments in its mouth."

Kirk nodded. "And two separate holes in the vertebra."

"Yes, Captain, it would have had two spinal chords and its brain cavity is a very bizarre shape."

"Have you mapped the interior hollows of the artefact?"

Sulu confirmed, "Yes, sir," and punched the keys necessary to bring up the requested material.

Kirk scrutinised the map with its vast spherical chambers in the torso and head. These chambers were open balloons without internal divisions. They were joined by literally kilometres of corridors which fanned through the wings like veins and interconnected with the arms, legs, torso, neck and head. "And there are definitely no signs of life?"

Sulu shook his head. "None, sir. The fossilised bones are the closest we get."

Kirk's pensive face cleared as an interesting possibility occurred to him. "Did you check for plasma and silicon based life forms?"

"No, sir," Sulu acknowledged neutrally, thinking this to be a very long shot.

"Scan for them, Mr Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk returned thoughtfully to his command chair. His hazel eyes fixed upon the gigantic winged Anubis filling the main screen as he asked, "Lt Uhura, besides Mr Scott's discussions with the Chief Engineer on the Pa'lyeon, has there been any other communication from the Vulcans?"

"No, sir. Would you like me to raise them?"

Kirk mulled that question over for a few seconds. "No, thank you, Lieutenant, just keep me advised of any communications not directed to Mr Scott."

"Aye, sir."

Slowly contemplating the fantastic rose gold wings of the jackal-headed artefact, the Captain wondered yet again if it was both a shrine for religious relics and a gigantic idol which was being shepherded through space on a pilgrimage by devotees who had died out so long ago that no physical trace remained of them.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Kirk's head snapped around to find Dr McCoy standing close by his side. "Bones, didn't I just leave you?"

"That was nearly six hours ago."

"Oh," the Captain muttered in obvious distraction.

With a sympathetic smile, McCoy went to the heart of the matter. "Not much progress, huh?"

"It's a lot closer. Other than that - none."

"The Vulcans haven't been able to throw any light on it?"

"No, Bones, they seem fairly preoccupied over there."

McCoy accepted that cryptic observation without comment. He switched to a more comfortable subject. "I have a problem."

"Spock?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I've had lots of practice."

"Yeah, Jim, I suppose you have."

"I gather he thinks he's well enough to return to duty."

"You got it."

"And is he, Bones?"

"That depends on how badly you need him right now."

"And if I was to say I needed him?"

McCoy shrugged. "I'd give him a vitamin shot and turn him loose."

"In that case, I need him."

An hour later, Spock was back on duty. He looked pale, even for a Vulcan, but otherwise none the worse for his recent illness. Mr Sulu was slowly and carefully bringing him up to date. "We haven't been able to detect any energy emissions or infusions or any unnatural effects from random particles or solar winds. We've scanned for carbon-based life forms and also for silicon and plasma based life forms, but the closest we can get to life are the fossilised bones of a bat-like creature which are housed within the head cavity."

Spock, who sat looking steadily up at Mr Sulu, asked, "Have you identified the materials that the artefact and ships are made of?"

"Actually, Mr Scott is working on that with the Pa'llyeon's Chief Engineer."

Spock folded his arms and cocked a curious eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"The ships and artefact are travelling at .000783 of sub-light speed, but that's all momentum; they're not under power and if the ships' occupants perished back in antiquity, which seems possible in view of there being no physical trace remaining, then we could be witnessing an ancient pilgrimage that met with an unforeseen catastrophe."

Spock reflected briefly upon this theory but did not appear in any way convinced by it. "Were you able to trace their course back to any likely planet?"

Sulu shook his head firmly. "No, sir, they're coming out of deep space and will cross our path in twelve hours and then head out into even deeper space."

Spock's expression shifted subtly to doubt. "Thank you, Mr Sulu, I shall review your data in full." He turned to his Science Station and bent quietly over his computer screen. His fingers moved swiftly across his instruments and his concentration deepened.

Kirk, who had sat watching this exchange with interest, called, "Mr Sulu."

"Sir?"

"I want you to pick a crew and take a shuttlecraft out to meet our visitors."

Sulu smiled delightedly. "Aye, sir."

"If there's life out there that we haven't detected, you should seem fairly non-threatening in a shuttle."

"Yes, sir."

"Nevertheless, I don't want you taking any unnecessary chances."

"You can count on me, sir."

"Good." Having dispensed with the formalities, Kirk added, "I particularly want close-up pictures. You should be able to supply those within an hour. That will give me plenty of time to decide whether transportation and internal reconnaissance is safe or warranted."

"Understood, sir."

In the main conference room on board the Pa'llyeon, Captain Sydon surveyed his haggard officers. He turned his full attention to Dr Sianas. "Report," he requested simply.

Sianas spoke for the record. "Despite our success in using the Human/Vulcan hybrid, First Officer Spock of the Starship Enterprise, to make a vaccine, we have suffered twenty-three fatalities. Nineteen of these perished before development of the vaccine; a further four who were critically ill did not respond to treatment with the vaccine. All crew members have now been treated with the vaccine, and the virus symptoms have been eradicated in those in the first phases of illness and are receding in those in the second and final stages." Dr Sianas's bleak grey eyes were darkly circled.

She was obviously exhausted and, like all the other officers present, in very serious need of sleep. "The crisis is over," she concluded.

Captain Sydon reflected on those powerful words for a few moments before stating, "I believe Dr Chapel will honour her commitment not to report our emergency to Starfleet."

Dr Sianas added her endorsement to that appraisal. "I agree," and decided, "it would also be illogical for Spock to report the situation, so our security is intact."

"Affirmative," Sydon concluded and, interlacing his long fingers, turned his attention to his Chief Engineer. "Progress report."

"My staff estimates fifteen hours until repairs are completed."

Captain Sydon realised this estimate revealed a three hour improvement. Nevertheless, they were still stranded directly in the flight path of the artefact.

Chief Engineer Sussitse added for the record what his Captain already knew. "Our main engine has been stripped and the fractured dilithium crystals removed and stored according to safety regulations. We have now installed new crystals and are currently rebuilding the engine."

"And how is your work with Chief Engineer Scott of the Enterprise progressing?"

If Sussitse had not been a Vulcan, his tone would have been apologetic as he responded to his Captain's enquiry with, "All attempts to analyse the materials of the artefact and its spacecraft have been negative."

"Speculate," Captain Sydon ordered.

"Insufficient data," Chief Engineer Sussitse replied, but seeing the dark light of fatigue harden in his superior's eyes, he theorised, "a selective form of cloaking device, which allows us to see but not to sense, could be responsible."

The Captain turned to Science Officer Michhaelu. "Do you concur?"

"The conclusion is logical."

Dissatisfied with this answer, Sydon repeated, "Do you concur?"

Michhaelu forewent pointing out that he had insufficient data to form, let alone prove, such a theory. "I concur," he conceded in a quiet voice in which his deep weariness was evident.

Captain Sydon gravely remarked, "If they are capable of selective matter cloaking without invisibility, we must ask ourselves what else they are capable of."

Brief sheets and pieces of colour washed across Spock's face as he bent over his main computer screen, reviewing the accumulated data on the gigantic artefact and the mysterious spacecraft

following in its wake. Information flashed before him but unfortunately for the most part it was negative information on what had been checked and what had not been checked out.

Captain Kirk came up beside his First Officer and asked in a soft, puzzled voice, "Spock, do you think it's possible that we're up against a matter-cloaking device?"

Spock roused himself and gazing neutrally up at his Captain, said, "I have insufficient data to support such a premise."

"Naturally," Kirk remarked dryly, an ironic expression playing across his face.

Spock raised his eyebrows in silent exclamation and, folding his arms, commented in his deepest and most pensive voice, "There is currently no known technology capable of neutralising the invisibility that is an inevitable factor in any known cloaking device."

"Our visitors aren't 'known'," Kirk pointed out.

"Nevertheless, cloaking without invisibility is a self-defeating process."

"Not if you're practising deception."

Again Spock's eyebrows went up. "Towards what end, Captain?"

Kirk murmured, "I only wish I knew," and when his First Officer made no comment, he added, "for the present, while we're trying to get information and clarify what we're dealing with, they're getting closer all the time."

"You believe us to be in danger?"

Kirk smiled with faint bemusement. "I believe us to be in the dark."

"I concur," Spock said with a very straight face.

"Sir," Lieutenant Uhura interrupted, "Captain Sydon of the Pa'llyeon would like to speak with you."

"On main screen," Kirk ordered, returning to his command chair. As he seated himself the view of the jackal-headed artefact and its golden followers amongst the stars was replaced by the gaunt image of Captain Sydon. He looked exhausted, but his voice held the strength of authority as he said, "Greetings, Captain Kirk."

"Greetings," Kirk returned politely. His keen eyes regarded the Vulcan Captain with concern, but his tone did not reflect this as he asked, "How are your engine repairs progressing?"

"We estimate less than fifteen hours' work remain."

Kirk nodded. The Vulcans were sitting ducks and that worried him greatly - although he did have a rather drastic solution to that problem, should he need it.

Sydon diverted to the source of Kirk's apprehension. "Despite our respective sensors finding fossilised bones, have you considered the possibility of selective matter cloaking explaining our negative

results on the approaching 'unknowns'?"

Looking meaningfully to Spock, Kirk took it one step at a time. "We've certainly been exploring why all our sensor probes and tests have failed to reveal life forms, or the nature of the materials composing the artefact and its spacecraft." Distantly, the Captain heard the bridge doors open and then the familiar footfall of Dr McCoy moving off to one side. Vaguely, he wondered how the Doctor always managed to arrive at these crucial moments. Frowning slightly, Kirk concluded, "So we have indeed been wondering if we're up against selective matter cloaking."

"And do you believe it logical to anticipate danger from such a deception?"

Kirk was taken aback by Sydon's forthrightness, his unVulcan willingness to play a hunch. "Yes," Kirk agreed respectfully, "I believe it logical to anticipate danger."

Captain Sydon accepted this without further comment. Instead he said, "We request free access to the information feedback from your shuttle when it gets into range. We also request that we now work fully on this problem together."

"Agreed, Captain Sydon. I respectfully grant both requests."

The Vulcan Captain nodded formally. "Sydon out."

The screen blanked and Dr McCoy stepped down to Kirk's side. "If he was my Captain, I'd order him to bed."

"Not now, Bones."

Undaunted, McCoy continued, "Besides the fact that he's obviously exhausted, he's not behaving logically. For a Vulcan, he's going so far out on a limb that I can hear the tree cracking."

Kirk's eyes fixed coolly on the Doctor, who he silenced with, "And why would he be exhausted, Bones?"

The Captain's voice was pitched very low, so only Spock heard this exchange. The First Officer turned and his dark eyes watched the Doctor's uncomfortable face. McCoy said diplomatically, "All right, Jim, I can take a hint. You want me off the bridge, right?"

"I want you off the bridge," Kirk confirmed in a mild, no-nonsense voice.

"All right, I'm going. I just stopped by to see how Spock's doing."

Stepping down to his Captain's side, Spock answered that one himself. "I am well, Doctor."

"One of these days those sensitive pointy ears of yours are going to hear something they shouldn't."

Spock arched an eloquent eyebrow. "I only encounter that problem while in your presence, Doctor."

Kirk suppressed a grin as McCoy stormed off the bridge with as much dignity as he could muster.

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On board the shuttlecraft Mr Sulu said steadily, "All right, here we go," as he approached the gigantic artefact head on. There was a suggestion of tightly controlled excitement in the way he sat over his pilot's instruments, but his voice and manner remained coolly professional.

The members of his small crew held their breaths as the enormity of the winged Anubis expanded until it was an all-consuming presence.

Engineer Michael Running-Cloud, a native American with dark flashing eyes, exclaimed, "It must have taken decades to build that thing." This wasn't a particularly scientific statement, but its awed emotional content was immediately understood.

"And the rest," Sulu agreed, adding, "let's take a closer look at one of the wings."

Dr Justine Smithson, an exobiologist holding the Starfleet rank of Lieutenant, brushed a handful of stray brown hair behind her ear and asked her two companions, "Are either of you familiar with SETI?"

Sulu's face fixed into thoughtful lines. "The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, you mean?"

Dr Smithson confirmed, "Yes, exactly." She stared in fascination at the seemingly endless, mottled rose-gold spread of the left wing. As they drew near, she said, "SETI only lasted into the early twenty-first century on Earth; even so, it generated four deep space probes."

Michael Running-Cloud mirrored Sulu's scepticism as he asked, "Are you suggesting that bat thing is some sort of crazy SETI probe from an unknown civilization?"

Dr Smithson's reply was dignified but defensive. "I'm not suggesting anything, I'm just asking questions."

Back on board the Enterprise, Captain Kirk and his bridge crew were listening attentively to this exchange and watching the pictures being fed back to them from the shuttle's powerful close-range sensors. The bridge's main screen was full of the rose-gold bubbles which were the fabric of the wing.

"They look like chambers," Sulu was saying as he set one of his sensors for a high resolution close-up and shifted uncomfortably inside the silver thickness of his spacesuit. He didn't often have to wear one, but when he did he always felt like a glorified sardine.

On board the Enterprise, the bridge crew and their Captain leaned intently towards the main screen as a burnished rose-gold bubble, one of the myriad cells in the wing, scintillated in close-up.

"Yes, it sure looks like a chamber," Engineer Running-Cloud agreed doubtfully, "but we read them as solid."

"Maybe that's the way we're meant to read them," Sulu observed strangely.

Back on board the Enterprise, Captain Kirk threw open a switch

and spoke directly to his Senior Helmsman. "Explain, Mr Sulu."

There was a pause. Then, taking a deep breath, Sulu plunged in the deep end with, "Sir, if we theorise that we're encountering some form of selective cloaking, then what's in the wing chambers may have been deliberately hidden from us."

"And what do you think could possibly be hidden in the wing chambers, Mr Sulu?"

"Sir, they could be anything from living quarters to survival capsules."

"And what's in between, Mr Sulu?"

"Well... " Sulu faltered, but quickly regaining his composure, added, "maybe cryogenic suspension of one or more species, or maybe a genetic bank for one or more species."

Captain Kirk nodded and summed this up in a single concept. "Then you're talking about an ark."

"Yes, sir, I suppose I am."

"Thank you, Mr Sulu, that's an interesting possibility and one that I had not previously considered."

After a few moments of reflective silence, Kirk threw open another switch. "Captain Sydon, any comments?"

The Vulcan Captain's voice came through loud and clear. "In itself it is an interesting possibility, but without a point of origin or predictable destination, it is without support."

"None of our theories to date are in any way supported," Kirk observed.

"Affirmative."

"Thank you, Captain Sydon." Kirk's eyes turned briefly inwards as he closed their communication channel.

An hour and a half later, in the main conference room on board the Enterprise, Captain Sydon said, "I propose a joint shuttle mission, the aim of which will be to gain access to the interior of the artefact with a view to changing its course, and, thereafter, the course of its ships."

Kirk was taken aback by the Vulcan Captain's hands-on approach. Not that he disagreed. As a Starfleet Captain, it was Kirk's immediate responsibility to protect the Pa'lyeon by diverting the artefact. His larger responsibility was to determine if the artefact and its following craft posed any threat to the Federation. Theoretically, as Captain of a Vulcan research vessel, it was Sydon's responsibility to determine the nature and ramifications of the phenomenon they were encountering.

"Yes, Captain Sydon, I believe a boarding party's our next step if we're to successfully divert our visitors from their current flight path."

"It is the logical course to take," Sydon corrected.

Kirk bit briefly at the faint smile that was threatening to embarrass him. It faded as he said, "It's unfortunate that we can't risk transportation."

"If they are using a specialised cloaking device, we might never arrive or return from such a journey," First Officer Michhaelu pointed out.

"Yes," Kirk conceded, "but if we encounter any danger, we're going to be very vulnerable with a shuttle as our only form of escape."

Captain Sydon gazed into Michhaelu's composed, intelligent face. "I suggest we use one of our shuttles, Captain Kirk - it will be faster and more manoeuvrable than one of yours."

First Officer Michhaelu turned silently from his Captain and met Jim Kirk's curious eyes. "I helped design the Pa'lyeon's shuttlecraft. They are easily twice as fast and manoeuvrable as the Enterprise's."

Scott, who had been seated in silence on the far side of the conference table, craned forward expectantly. Kirk caught this slight movement out of the corner of his eye, and turning, glared at his Chief Engineer. It would not be diplomatic to ask the Vulcans for details; their security precluded any such confidence. Getting the message loud and clear, Scott self-consciously and disappointedly leaned back into his seat and his silence. Sitting opposite him, Pa'lyeon Chief Engineer Sussitse watched Scott with careful but understanding eyes.

"Thank you, Captain Sydon," Kirk said smoothly, "we accept the offer of your shuttlecraft." Jim Kirk turned his full attention to his Science Officer. "Mr Spock, please brief us on possible points of entry into the artefact."

Spock slipped the computer disk he was holding into the loading slot on the small instrument panel before him. On the triangular viewer in the centre of the circular conference table, the image of the enormous winged Anubis snapped into being. "I believe," Spock remarked solemnly, "that the only possible site for an airlock is actually within the mouth."

With a crooked grin Dr McCoy needled, "That sounds like a guess to me, Spock."

Turning his full attention on the Doctor, Spock informed him in his most tolerant and long-suffering voice, "I am not guessing Doctor. I never guess. I do, however, draw conclusions from the elimination of other factors. In this case, Mr Sulu's search did not uncover an airlock. Therefore, it is logical to assume that either an airlock does not exist, or that the unusual construction at the back of the mouth actually is one."

Unfazed, McCoy enquired, "And if it's not?"

Spock drew a slow breath and cocked his head to one side, which was about the closest he could come to exasperation. He directed his attention towards Captains Sydon and Kirk, saying, "That is not my decision to make."

Refraining from comment, the Vulcan Captain observed this brief confrontation with a rather blank and baffled expression. He definitely did not understand the Doctor's difficult moments.

Watching the images on the triangular viewer zoom inside the mouth and illuminate a golden spidery structure of metal sheets and pipes that could, with a stretch of the imagination, be an airlock, Kirk said non-committally, "We'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it, Bones." The Vulcans, Sydon and Michhaelu, turned curiously to each other as Kirk unconsciously used his nickname for McCoy.

Raising an almost amused eyebrow, Spock drew this slip of the tongue to his Captain's attention. Kirk cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Captain Sydon, I suggest that you and I and our Science Officers crew the shuttlecraft."

McCoy leaned forward and tried to interject, but Kirk cut him firmly off by adding, "And if your medical personnel are still involved in that research project, I request permission to take both Dr McCoy and Nurse Chapel along."

Things unsaid hung heavy in the atmosphere. Eventually Captain Sydon nodded. "Agreed, Captain Kirk." Sydon directed his attention down the table. "I would also like Chief Engineer Sussitse to accompany us."

Brightening, Scott looked to Kirk with baited breath. With a wry smile, the Captain came through for him. "And I would like to take Mr Scott."

Scott beamed from ear to ear. "Thank ye, sir."

Kirk looked questioningly at his Vulcan colleague. "We could take exobiologists and palaeontologists, but our Science and Medical Officers could cover these areas."

"Yes," Captain Sydon decided. "It would be unwise to take too large a crew into possible danger."

"In that case - " Kirk stood decisively - "if you'll give us twenty minutes to kit ourselves out, we'll join you shortly on the Pa'lyeon."

Being designed for the dual purpose of atmospheric and space work, the black Pa'lyeon shuttlecraft had a sleek, glider-like appearance. She was both elegant and functional, with body-hugging wings, the aerodynamic economy of which had sent a satisfied sigh through Scott.

Like their shuttle, the spacesuits worn by the Vulcans were also black, but their metallic fabric endlessly caught the light and so the suits seemed to be shot through with quicksilver. The Enterprise personnel, wearing silver suits, seemed curiously colourless in comparison.

Captain Sydon had chosen to pilot their shuttlecraft on the swift fifteen minute journey to the artefact. When they entered the golden, yawning mouth of the huge winged Anubis, he turned briefly to Kirk, who was sitting in the co-pilot's seat beside him. There was an increased brightness to Sydon's eyes which Jim Kirk realized

must be due more to stimulants than mind control, and he wondered how long a Vulcan could survive without sleep, and how long a Vulcan could exist on his will and on stimulants. He had been tempted to ask Dr McCoy, but reminded himself that it would be illogical for Vulcans to continue functioning, even in their present crisis, if it endangered themselves or anyone else.

"Helmets on," Captain Sydon ordered his crew of Pa'llyeon and Enterprise officers, all of whom promptly locked their helmets into place. Kirk briefly piloted the shuttle as Sydon followed suit. All their actions had a smooth, efficient edge to them. They were professionals doing the job they'd been trained to do. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of tense apprehension pressed in upon them.

Chris Chapel, sitting in the rear with Dr McCoy, turned and gave him a worried look as they entered the darkness inside the artefact's mouth. The shuttle's bank of searchlights snapped on and lit up what was in every detail a huge internal reconstruction of a mouth. But it was a very alien mouth. There were no teeth, only row upon row of rippling filaments top and bottom, which also replaced a tongue. "They weren't moving before," Kirk said in a controlled but sudden voice.

Watching the slow snaking of the golden mouth filaments, Sydon confirmed, "No, they were not."

Kirk urged, "Enterprise and Pa'llyeon, are you picking up anything?"

"Negative," the acting Commander of the Pa'llyeon responded almost immediately.

Sulu took a little longer, but the answer was the same. "No, sir, nothing. We can see the movement on your pictures, but it's not registering on our instruments."

"Sir," Scott interjected, "that confirms selective cloaking tae me."

This statement was met with Vulcan silence. Kirk looked briefly over his shoulder at Spock, who managed to incline his head neutrally inside his helmet. The Captain remarked, "That is yet to be confirmed, Mr Scott. However, when Mr Sulu explored in here everything was still, so it suggests to me that there's someone somewhere pushing buttons."

Sydon glanced gravely at his colleague. "Affirmative."

McCoy, finding this all very disquieting, asked, "So why're they rolling the red carpet out for us?"

Much to the Doctor's annoyance, Spock replied to this with a brief, patronising lecture. "Logic suggests Mr Sulu's shuttle mission was interpreted as reconnaissance whilst ours is understood to be an actual boarding party."

"I don't see any logic in that," McCoy flared hotly.

"Dr McCoy," Kirk briskly cautioned, "this is neither the time nor the place for an argument on logic." What went unsaid was that it was neither the time nor the place to offend the Vulcans.

A rather strained silence followed.

They were bearing down on the strange construction at the back of the mouth, hoping it was an airlock, when something unexpected and unnerving happened. Like a fan folding back on itself, an opening airlock was revealed. "More red carpet for you, Bones."

"Fascinating," Spock observed.

Chris Chapel turned to Dr McCoy, who was wearing a very sour expression. She turned uneasily back towards the shuttle's viewscreen. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something was wrong. Then it hit her like a thunderbolt. "Sir!" she cried. "I can see stars inside."

That galvanised everyone's attention. "Yes," Captain Sydon agreed promptly. "You are quite right, Dr Chapel."

They sailed into the airlock in an electrified silence. Rather than entering an artificial space body, they had the convincing impression that they were leaving one, which they definitely were not.

"This confirms selective cloaking," Spock commented in a cool, clinical voice.

McCoy tightly demanded that Spock "Explain."

The First Officer obliged with, "They have split the cloaking process. On the outside we can visually detect the presence and register the dimensions of the artefact and its craft, but that is all. On the inside, the invisibility factor applies." He and Michhaelu were working feverishly at their instruments. "We can now scan and register the materials of this object."

Listening distractedly to this exchange, Kirk watched worriedly as Captain Sydon worked quickly at his communication controls. "Have you lost contact with our ships?"

"Affirmative." Sydon sounded most uncomfortable with this revelation. He turned the shuttle in a slow rotation until they could clearly see the distant outside images of the Pa'lyeon and Enterprise.

"Fascinating," Dr McCoy observed in bitter sarcasm.

Turning awkwardly, Kirk glanced over his First Officer's bent, helmeted head and silenced McCoy with a look of impatient reprimand. The Captain went on to ask, "Spock, what sort of materials are you scanning?"

The First Officer slowly raised his eyes and said, "Silver, gold, titanium alloys, dilithium crystals, diamonds, fire stones and lesser precious metals and crystals."

Kirk felt his jaw dropping. He clenched its muscles. "Natural or synthetic?"

"Impossible to tell Captain, although they do seem to be flawlessly natural. Of course, the titanium alloys are not natural."

"What about life forms?" Chris Chapel interjected.

Michhaelu and Spock were both working over their instrument boards and it was several long moments before Michhaelu replied, "There are carbon based life forms but I am unable to register the species without visual data."

Dr McCoy stood and hurried up the aisle past Engineers Scott and Sussitse. He came and leaned over Spock. Jim Kirk was also peering intently at Spock's puzzling readouts. "Feed that back to Chris and me, will you, Spock."

The First Officer threw the necessary switches. "As you wish, Doctor."

McCoy hurried back to his station, Chris Chapel was already taking in the material with sharp but baffled eyes. The Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer began reviewing the data with his own brand of methodical intensity. Eventually Chapel decided, "The artefact's wings are full of humanoids."

Meeting the bright blue of Chapel's eyes, McCoy frowningly agreed, "Yeah, but there's a different species in each wing."

Scott didn't look up from his own readouts on the engineering aspects of the artefact, but he spoke for the benefit of all when he said, "The airlock's closed and repressurising and everywhere but in th' wing chambers, there's th' same mix of air as we breathe on th' Enterprise, exactly th' same mix and at th' same pressure!"

"And what of gravity?" Captain Sydon asked.

His own engineer, Sussitse, answered that. "An average of the 'standard' gravity experienced by Vulcans, Humans and Romulans."

Kirk turned back to Sydon saying, "I know this set up is neither Human nor Vulcan, and I don't believe the Romulans capable of it."

Captain Sydon's response to this was cryptic. "Your process of elimination is logical, but it does not advance our position."

Dr McCoy was about to observe that logic never advanced anyone's position, but thought better of it.

Kirk's thoughts had moved on. "So if we're not dealing with a known humanoid species, we're dealing with an unknown."

"Affirmative, Captain Kirk."

Back on the Bridge of the Enterprise, Uhura finished conferring with the Chief Communications Officer on board the Pa'llyeon. She then turned hurriedly to acting Commander Sulu. "Sir, all attempts at re-establishing contact have now failed. Their transmissions are either being blocked, or they are no longer capable of sending."

This disquieting news was not unexpected. Sulu promptly opened a channel to the acting Commander of the Pa'llyeon. "Mr Minshesu, I suggest we despatch a shuttle. It'll take fifteen minutes to arrive and that may be as long as we can afford to wait before acting."

There was a long silence. Eventually Mr Minshesu's firm and unmistakably feminine voice replied, "Agreed. Please transport

suitable personnel to co-crew one of our craft."

Sulu nodded to Chekov, who immediately bent and spoke softly into his console communicator, advising the appropriate officers.

"They'll be suited up and ready to beam aboard within the next five minutes," Sulu assured his colleague.

Minshesu acknowledged, "Understood." Her disembodied voice was very calm and competent.

Sulu was about to end their communication when something unexpected and very alarming happened. The artefact and its fleet of spacecraft vanished, and immediately they did so, the bridge sensors scintillated with readings.

Taken aback, Sulu slowly decided, "Mr Minshesu, I think we'd better put that rescue mission on hold while we assess our new sensor data."

"Affirmative."

On board the Vulcan shuttle within the airlock of the artefact, there was a unanimous gasp as blackness, stars and the spaceships Enterprise and Pa'lyeon abruptly disappeared. Without exception, everyone stared through the shuttle viewscreen at the silver and gold ribbing of the long tunnel which had snapped into existence about them. Then the startlement and spell of shocked disbelief was broken and everyone bent hastily over their instruments, but no matter what buttons they pushed or what sequences they programmed, the result was always the same - nothing. All sensors were dead. Only the instrumentation necessary to pilot the shuttle was active.

"They've reversed the cloak," Kirk surmised. This inevitable conclusion was met with a stunned silence. He looked to Sydon, who was working urgently at his communication controls. "In which case we should be able to communicate with our ships?"

In response, Sydon ordered, "Science - status report." Spock and Michhaelu were already working on this. It was the Pa'lyeon Science Officer who finally stated, "Ship to ship is being jammed."

Sydon looked away from his communication controls, saying drily, "I believe, Captain Kirk, that diplomacy is the only logical course remaining open to us."

Jim Kirk accepted that understatement with grim resolve. "Yes, Captain Sydon, I'm in complete agreement with you."

"In that case, I propose we land here in the airlock and leave Engineer Sussitse in charge of the shuttle while the rest of us attempt to make contact with the occupants."

Meeting the dark glaze of Captain Sydon's eyes, Kirk said simply, "Yes, let's do that."

A few minutes later the sleek black glider shape of their Vulcan shuttlecraft settled gently on the curvature of the tunnel wall. Kirk, Sydon, Spock and Michhaelu cautiously disembarked. Scott stepped down to the tunnel's surface with his usual brisk enthusiasm. Chris Chapel and Dr McCoy reluctantly brought up the

rear. They all wore tricorders, but only the medical ones worked. For some reason, living creatures at close range were an anomaly the cloaking device either could not, or specifically avoided, neutralising.

Mr Spock gazed at the flash and glint of Dr McCoy's tricorder and muttered, "Fascinating."

The physician rolled his eyes in a long-suffering gesture of exasperation and saw Mr Scott walking sedately up the tunnel wall. "Gravity equalisation," Spock blandly informed the astonished Doctor.

"Scotty, get down from there," McCoy snapped. "You're giving me the creeps."

"Mr Scott," Kirk added firmly, "this is not the time to test the laws of engineered gravity. Regroup."

"Aye, sir." The Enterprise's Chief Engineer sighed dejectedly and did as he was ordered.

They set off down the gold and silver ribbed tunnel with their footfalls creating a crisp metallic rhythm. A few minutes later they reached the end of the long airlock. They were about to search for controls when the airlock opened and they were able to step through into the artefact proper. It was an unsettling experience, for they were on the edge of what appeared to be a vast well. Kirk and Sydon quickly reorientated themselves and stepped over the edge and into the tunnel which led directly down into the huge spherical cavity in the torso of the giant winged Anubis.

Chris Chapel looked nervously to Dr McCoy and queried, "Gravity equalisation?"

"Affirmative," Spock interjected in a careful yet encouraging voice.

"I only *think* I'll fall, right?"

"Yes, Nurse Chapel," Spock agreed. "In this instance your eyes are deceiving you."

Dr McCoy grimaced and said, "Come on, Chris. I've got a nasty feeling this's only the curtain raiser."

Michhaelu looked enquiringly to Spock as McCoy and Chapel stepped over the rim and stood upright on the descending wall which, from their new perspective, was now horizontal.

This new tunnel was half as large as that of the airlock and its ribs of silver and gold were exquisite in the soft lighting which appeared to emanate from their metals.

The landing party progressed cautiously down the tunnel. It was a long and mostly silent walk during which everyone was aware of their vulnerability. Scott found his hand unconsciously straying to his waistband and the phaser clipped there. Dr McCoy and Christine Chapel worked with their medical tricorders, trying to make sense out of the faint but basically humanoid readings which were fraught with discrepancies and troubling anomalies. Spock and Michhaelu quietly watched the frustrated progress of the doctors' work.

"Since the physicians are the only ones fortunate enough to get readings, we'll just have to rely on our senses and our common sense," Kirk observed in a cryptic aside to his Vulcan colleague.

"Affirmative," Sydon returned, missing the emotional content of what Kirk had said entirely.

"For example," Jim Kirk continued, "that light at the end of the tunnel looks like sunlight - simulated sunlight."

Captain Sydon scrutinised the white shining brightness which was growing more intense as they approached. "Your supposition is logical."

Kirk regarded Sydon with a sardonic sideways glance but said nothing. The Vulcan's black spacesuit rippled with reflected light at every movement, but despite the calm composure of his face, behind the transparency of his helmet there was a grey gauntness to him that was of definite and ongoing concern to his Starfleet colleague.

"Sir," Scott said, coming up beside his Captain, "I think I see green beyond th' light."

Kirk peered into the distance. "Yes, Scotty, me too."

"Aye," Scott murmured, "'tis a strange set-up."

No-one answered that - there was no need, it was an emotional statement to which only the Humans could relate. They kept walking and soon the situation became clear.

Captains Sydon and Kirk stood at the end of the tunnel and stared for a very long time as the unexpected sight impacted fully upon them.

"Well I'll be..." Dr McCoy's voice trailed off into stunned silence.

"It's just like a space station!" Scotty decided, his brogue thickening with intense excitement.

Chris Chapel nodded as her astonished blue eyes searched and probed the spectacle.

Before them, opening up like the inside of an enormous balloon within the torso of the artefact, was the green forested interior of a space station. At its centre, suspended in the air at the point of gravitational cancellation, was a small artificial sun. Its white-gold light gilded the meandering streams and forest which reached in every direction on the curvature of the wall.

Dr McCoy came up between Kirk and Sydon. "I get a close life form reading, Jim, but all I see is trees."

Captain Sydon simplified this with, "Obviously it is concealed within the forest."

"Yes, we'd best take a look," Kirk agreed.

They stepped over the edge of the tunnel into the interior of the huge forested balloon which was connected in what appeared a random fashion to many other tunnels. Chris Chapel's senses swam as

she attempted to orientate herself once inside the torso's lush green interior. It was disarming to see the forest stretch away before her and then climb and arch overhead in all directions. It was doubly unsettling to watch the thin, silvery stream, very high overhead, flowing and forming tiny crystal bubbles as it moved among its time-worn rocks. Space stations always took getting used to. Planets and spaceships worked on the horizontal and on gravity that only went one way, but space stations were neither vertical nor horizontal and their gravity went every which way but up and down.

"It's absolutely huge in here!" Chapel exclaimed. "It'd take us at least an hour to do just one circuit of this place." Without thinking she went to scratch her nose and met the hard transparency of her helmet with a low rubbing sound.

Taking in a patch of bright orange flowers, Jim Kirk observed, "Yes, it's enough to give you hay fever, isn't it, Chris?"

Chapel flushed a little. "Yes, sir."

Spock knelt to examine the flowers. They had a strangely gelatinous appearance. As he drew near they began to droop. He backed off and they straightened, almost snapping into their former positions.

"That's damned queer," McCoy muttered.

"Indeed, Doctor, but without the benefit of tricorder readings, it is impossible to determine what affected them."

"Perhaps it's your magnetic personality," McCoy muttered.

Spock cocked an eyebrow in a gesture of sufferance and commented, "Possibly."

"Gentlemen," Kirk cut in before they got in the groove, "end of discussion. Do I make myself plain?"

McCoy's belligerence mellowed to an expression of petulance. Spock looked innocent and inscrutable.

Michhaelu came up beside his Captain and said in a hesitant, almost embarrassed tone, "Sir, I sense something."

Sydon regarded him long and searchingly before quietly requesting, "Explain."

Despite his youth, the Vulcan Science Officer looked particularly haggard. "It is as if something is searching, trying to find a way into my mind."

Kirk shot a sideways glance at McCoy, who already had his tricorder trained on Michhaelu. "He checks out normal, Jim. It could just be fatigue - it's got to catch up with him some time."

Captain Sydon did not look at all convinced. Surprisingly, he said, "Mr Michhaelu is what we on Vulcan call a Praretaen - in your terminology, a sensitive."

McCoy gaped. "Are you trying to tell me he's psychic?"

Everyone except Spock focused their amazed concentration on the Vulcan Captain. "No, Doctor. I am telling you that in a very small

number of Vulcan individuals it is not necessary to make physical contact for a mind meld. Close physical proximity is enough."

Kirk spoke for everyone when he asked, "But is such a mind meld total?"

"No, Captain, it is only partial and always inferior to the true experience."

A stunned silence greeted this revelation.

"Kin ye zero in on it, Mr Michhaelu?" Scott asked. It was a very practical and important question.

"I shall try," the pensive young Vulcan responded after a nod from his Captain. Turning slowly, he headed off into the lush greenness of the surrounding forest.

Chris Chapel shot Dr McCoy a worried look which he grimly returned. They all followed Mr Michhaelu.

In less than five minutes the Vulcan First Officer stopped in the mixture of light and shadow below a broad canopied tree. The short grass beneath the heavy soles of their spacesuit boots had a cushioning quality. They all stood very still as Mr Michhaelu approached the humanoid who was standing with its back to the tree's smooth beige trunk.

The being was definitely a type of humanoid, but not one that had ever before been encountered. It was of average height, but delicate to the point of fragility. Its slender limbs seemed unusually long, as did the fingers on its webbed hands. But strangest of all was the crumpled webbing that hung like tissue paper beneath its arms and connected to the sides of its lithe body. Mr Michhaelu gazed in passive rapture upon the creature's face. Its long elongated eyes were closed in exquisite tranquillity and its tiny sculptured nose and mouth completed its impression of serenity. The being's ears were also small, but pointed like a Vulcan's. And although it was naked and pink and there were no sexual indicators, Chris Chapel immediately thought of it in masculine terms. She pointed her tricorder and shook her head over its readings. There was a huge heart and four lungs but the digestive system was withered, as if evolution was very slowly phasing it out. The brain was almost Human in construction, but its readings were very odd. The white silver of Spock's spacesuit briefly distracted Chapel. She passed her tricorder to him, asking, "Do those readings suggest a type of meditation trance to you?"

Spock scrutinised the readings with painstaking care. "Yes, I would also read them as a meditative state."

Everyone turned to stare, even Sydon. It was a very brief interlude, but long enough for Michhaelu to reach unnoticed for the winged being. The black of his space-suited hand came to rest gently on the side of the creature's entranced face.

Turning away from Spock, and returning his full attention to his Science Officer, Sydon immediately and urgently cried, "Captain Kirk, quickly, break the mind meld!"

With a horrified snap, Kirk's attention swung and locked onto Michhaelu. He leapt forward, and seizing the stupefied Vulcan pulled him backwards and away. They both stumbled. Scott steadied

Kirk and Captain Sydon grabbed his officer as he collapsed.

In deep concern, Jim Kirk asked, "Is he all right?"

Chapel and McCoy already had their medical tricorders trained on the unconscious Michhaelu who was cradled in the arms of his Vulcan Captain.

As the doctors frowned over their readings, Sydon quickly answered, "No, he is far from all right. He is suffering from what you would, in Human terminology, call empathic shock. I must get him straight back to the shuttlecraft so I can remove his helmet and establish a full mind meld to mend the damage before it is too late."

"Of course," Kirk agreed hastily. Not fully understanding what had happened or what was about to happen, but appreciating the urgency, he ordered, "Scotty, you help Captain Sydon get Mr Michhaelu back to the shuttle. Chris, you'd better go along too in case there's anything you can do."

Chapel looked worriedly to Spock, but it was Kirk who spoke her thoughts out loud. "Spock, you're not a sensitive, are you?"

"No, sir, I am not."

"Good - but don't go touching any aliens, just in case."

"As you wish, Captain," was the very serious reply.

Scott and Sydon were already moving away with the limp form of Science Officer Michhaelu supported between them. Kirk's parting words to Chapel were, "Immediately you get any idea of what happened to Michhaelu, contact me."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now get going."

Chapel left hurriedly.

"Knowing that Sydon's party was moving out of suit-to-suit range, McCoy looked to the winged alien and asked in a tense but informal tone, "Where to from here, Jim?"

"I want to see what's in one of those wing chambers, and if that doesn't answer our questions then I want to see what's in the head cavity. If nothing else, that's the most likely site for a control centre."

Spock was consulting a hard-copy map taken during the Enterprise's last scans of the artefact. "Two hundred metres ahead there should be a tunnel leading to the left wing."

Kirk took a deep, decisive breath. "Let's go."

They moved away from the entranced alien to pass through the trees whose broad canopies broke the artificial sunlight into pieces and scattered it about their feet. Soon they came to another silver and gold striped tunnel. They stepped into it, with Dr McCoy saying, "I thought there were meant to be precious stones and other metals here, Spock."

"Yes, Doctor, but obviously they are the working parts between the outer and inner shells of this space station."

It was Jim Kirk who rephrased this for the Doctor. "Spock's talking about crystalline engineering, Bones."

"But surely that would cost a fortune."

"That is a subjective statement, Doctor, which arguably may have no meaning to the builders of this station."

"Dammit, Spock, your opinion's no better than my observation."

"Bones," Kirk firmly interjected, "the bottom line is that crystalline engineering would have a life so much longer than that of conventional engineering that it would last for literally hundreds of thousands of years."

McCoy stopped dead in his tracks. "But they're heading out into deep space! They're going nowhere!"

"Indeed," Spock confirmed in his most inscrutable tone.

"Why, Spock, why?"

"We do not have enough data to form a logical hypothesis."

McCoy's hands came up and spread in a gesture of exasperation, "Well then, guess!"

"Really, Dr McCoy, you would not guess when practising medicine."

"The hell I wouldn't," McCoy glowered. "Sometimes, in life threatening situations, I've had no other choice but to guess!"

"I still have a choice," Spock replied coolly, "and my choice is to await further information, not to guess."

"Gentlemen," Kirk chided, "that's enough. You're distracting each other and you're distracting me."

A sullen silence ensued which was unbroken as they turned down into another, narrower tunnel and then, a short time later, up into an even narrower passage which lead directly to a wing chamber.

When they arrived, they stood and stared in bemused wonderment. Eventually McCoy decided, "It looks just like an embryo," and added drily, "except it reads like it's floating in zero gravity, it's breathing oxygen saturated air and there's no umbilicus."

Peering into the transparent cocoon housed within the large rose-gold bell of its chamber, Kirk took in the curled foetal shape with its rich brown fur and its wolfish head and asked, "Does it read as humanoid, Bones?"

McCoy was already working on that with his tricorder. Soon he said, "Yeah, it checks out as humanoid, but it sure as hell doesn't look it."

"No," Kirk agreed. "I can see a forked tail, but the limbs and what I can see of the torso look very humanoid."

"And then there's the ears Jim. Spock's got a pair like that."

Spock eyed the long pointed ears standing up on the head like those of a jackal and said, "Really, Doctor."

"Actually, Spock, his blood is a little like yours - it has qualities that may be hybrid, but more than likely are the result of genetic engineering."

"Fascinating."

McCoy looked up from his tricorder, "The brainwave readings have foetal characteristics, but that thing looks fully grown to me."

Kirk ran his eyes carefully over the creature's muscle definition. "Me, too."

"Is it not logical to assume that if the winged creature we encountered earlier was in a meditative state, that this creature is practising a deeply regressive state of meditation?"

The Captain frowned doubtfully. "But why, Spock?"

"On a practical level, energy conservation and longevity. On a spiritual level, to achieve a pure state of mind control as a basis upon which to build deeper spiritual awareness."

McCoy snorted. "And you never guess."

"No, Doctor, I never guess."

"Come on," the Captain interjected, "let's check out some more of these chambers."

They worked their way through meandering tunnels and examined three more wing chambers. The same furred humanoid shape, with a forked tail and a wolfish head in which the eyes were serenely closed, floated in each one.

"You know, Jim," McCoy said finally, "from the outside, this whole space station looks just like a cross between one of these furred creatures and that winged one we saw earlier."

"Yes," Kirk mused, "you may have something there." He paused, pondering the facts. "This set-up may be a co-operative exercise between two entirely different species."

"Oh, they are and they aren't different species, Jim. They have certain genetic characteristics in common and others that appear entirely opposite, almost like they were genetically engineered."

"Nurse Chapel to Captain Kirk. Are you reading me, sir?"

Kirk, looking thoughtfully at McCoy, hit the medium range switch on the communication controls on his left forearm. "Loud and clear, Chris. Go ahead."

"Sir, Captain Sydon established some sort of mind meld with Mr Michhaelu and brought him back to consciousness."

Kirk shifted his attention enquiringly to Spock as Chapel

added, "Mr Michhaelu was only awake for a few minutes, just long enough to tell us that there are two types of beings on this space station, that they are from the twin moons of a planet, probably M class, and that they're on a quest."

"What sort of quest, Chris?"

"Mr Michhaelu was very confused, and Captain Sydon believes that, because his mind meld with the alien wasn't total due to the lack of complete physical contact, he will remain confused."

Spock raised a neutral eyebrow.

"I see," the Captain remarked regretfully.

"Captain Kirk, this is Sydon. What is your current status?"

"We're in the left wing. We've found the other life forms Mr Michhaelu spoke of. There are thousands of them in a state of hibernation."

"Hibernation?"

"Well, that's the description that fits best. Mr Spock thinks they're meditating. I don't know what to think."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed," Kirk wryly confirmed before going on to advise his colleague, "these beings are wingless, have a humanoid body shape, a forked tail, a jackal-type head and are covered in fur. They appear fully grown, yet they're curled into foetal positions and floating in oxygen-rich air in zero gravity. Their brainwave readings are described by Dr McCoy as embryonic and Mr Spock as meditative."

Sydon took a few long moments to digest that. Slowly he asked, "What are your plans?"

"If you're free to go to the right wing and check out its chambers, we'll go to the head cavity as it's the most likely site for a control centre. But if it's not, and we can't therefore change the course of this station, I'd like, with your concurrence, to leave and, once we return to our respective ships, tow the Pa'lyeon out of the way with a tractor beam."

"I shall of course go to the right wing. But as regards the tractor beam, we have much sensitive equipment on the Pa'lyeon that could be damaged by its use."

"I fully appreciate that, Captain, but if we can't divert this space station a tractor beam seems our only alternative. Otherwise this station is on a collision course with both the Pa'lyeon and the Enterprise. We're already within transporter range and the point of actual impact is less than five and a half hours away."

"Your argument is logical," the Vulcan Captain conceded. "Sydon out."

McCoy grinned. "Congratulations, Jim, it's quite a compliment for a Vulcan to acknowledge logic in a non-Vulcan."

Spock inclined his head and, fixing his antagonist with stern, dark eyes, lectured, "A tractor beam can do a lot of damage, Doctor,

particularly to computer memory. It is quite logical for Captain Sydon to attempt to avoid this course of action."

Kirk raised his silver-gloved hands. "Enough!" His tone got their immediate attention. "I don't know about you two, but I'm tired of being in this suit." He consulted his map of the space station. "So let's get this business over and done with."

They moved off in a difficult silence. It was a long walk and a complicated one. Without a map, becoming lost would have been inevitable. The vast balloon of the torso cavity seemed huge after the confinement of the wing chambers and tunnels. They walked hurriedly through its forest of broad canopied trees and spongy grasses and tight clumps of orange flowers that invariably drooped as Spock passed by. It took nearly forty minutes to reach the tunnel that led upwards to the head, and when they arrived all their expectations evaporated in shock.

The head cavity was only a third the size of the green forested hollow in the torso but there were no trees or flowers and there was no artificial sun. Instead, the head cavity was lined with a shimmering blue balloon of energy. From this extended numerous thin rods of red laser light intersecting the fossilised bones at the cavity's centre and holding them firmly in place.

Stepping carefully into the head, Kirk found himself suddenly floating. Spock's lightning reflexes were only just fast enough for him to grab his Captain's flailing arm.

"Thank you, Spock, I didn't expect weightlessness."

The First Officer made no comment as he helped Kirk back into the tunnel.

Staring at the distant collection of fossilised bones bathed in the red of the laser lines, Spock murmured, "Fascinating."

"I'm not fascinated, Spock, I'm damned confused. What the hell's going on?"

"Dr McCoy, your outburst of temper is predictable, but not at all helpful."

"Dammit, Spock, don't get superior with me!"

"Gentlemen, that's enough," Kirk said almost automatically as he gazed in distraction upon the bat-like outline of the fossilised bones with their three metre wing-span. The bones looked very small and fragmentary, but their overall shape was clear and unmistakable. "They have the technology for equalised gravity," Kirk puzzled, "and could easily hold that fossil in place at the gravity cancellation point, so why use something as clumsy as laser lines and weightlessness?"

"Yes, Captain, I agree, the weightlessness and method of suspension are quite deliberate."

"But why, Spock, why?"

"I can think of no logical answer."

McCoy threw his hands up. "Will wonders never cease!"

Ignoring him, Spock added, "Nevertheless, this has got to be the key to the mystery."

In distraction, Kirk murmured, "Agreed, Spock," as he stared hard at the fossil. "Come on, we'll anchor ourselves with magnetic lines and go in and have a close look at that thing."

"Captain Sydon to Captain Kirk."

Jim Kirk finished securing the magnetic grip of his tow line to the tunnel wall before hitting his communication switch. "Kirk here."

"Dr Chapel and I are in the right wing. Its chambers contain thousands of winged individuals like the one Mr Michhaelu partially mind melded with. It is Dr Chapel's opinion that they are in a state of hibernation."

"Sir," Chapel's steady voice reported, "I get the definite impression that they are sleepers who need a particular event to trigger their awakening."

"Yes, Chris, but they're not all asleep. The one Mr Michhaelu led us to was definitely conscious at some level."

There was a pause during which Chris Chapel contemplated playing a hunch. "Sir, that one could have been a caretaker."

Kirk looked to Spock whose eyebrows went up in mild exclamation.

The Captain compressed his lips as he thought it over. "That's a very interesting suggestion, Chris. We'll bear it in mind."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain Sydon, if they are sleepers awaiting a particular event to awaken them, do you have any theories on what that event might be?"

"No, Captain, I can only observe that obviously it is not us."

Kirk sighed heavily. "Granted." He gazed into the hollow of the head cavity and concluded, "We are about to enter the head. There is no gravity inside, but at the cavity's centre there are fossilised bones. They're locked into position by laser struts."

There was a lull as Captain Sydon absorbed this unexpected information. "Can we be of any further assistance to you?"

"No, thank you, Captain Sydon, we shall rendezvous with you at the shuttle immediately we're finished here. Kirk out."

"I don't see any controls, so I don't know what you expect to find in there," McCoy said rather peevishly.

"Whether I do or I don't find anything in there, I'll have to make a full report back to Starfleet, and Bones, you know I can't do that until I've obtained all the information I can possibly obtain, even if it generates more questions than it answers."

The Doctor brooded briefly on this. "Yeah, Jim, I see your point. Lead on."

Jim Kirk gave his old friend one of his reassuring smiles.

Spock fingered the temperature gauge on his chest control panel, lowering his suit's heating by six degrees. Catching this movement out of the corner of his eye, McCoy trained his tricorder casually on the First Officer and asked in the soothing physician's voice he reserved especially for these occasions, "Feeling warm, Spock?"

This enquiry met with a stony silence. McCoy scrutinised his readings; finally he muttered, "Some of that damned virus must've found a clever hiding place somewhere in your system, Spock."

Deeply concerned, Kirk cut in, "But you were sure he was over it, Bones."

McCoy looked very unhappy and apologetic. "The virus is a mutation, Jim. Obviously there's something we didn't anticipate in Spock's hybrid system that's allowed it to regenerate."

Digesting the previously withheld information on virus mutation, the Captain looked to his First Officer and asked worriedly, "Spock, are you up to finishing this?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Bones?"

"Yeah, Jim, he's got another couple of hours before it really hits him. Although he's contagious again, so we're going to have to take special precautions."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "All right, we're running out of time, so let's finish up here, and Spock... "

"Yes, Captain?"

"Listen carefully - this is an order. If you start feeling too ill to continue, you let us know."

Spock's dark eyes already had a feverish moistness to them. He held to a non-committal silence but Jim Kirk waited him out. Finally, he acquiesced. "Yes, Captain."

"Don't worry, Jim, I'll keep an eye on him," McCoy quietly assured.

Nodding slowly, with his troubled eyes fixed upon Spock, Kirk ordered, "Follow me." Trailing the thin silver cord of his security line, which was magnetically anchored to the surface of the tunnel, the Captain kicked off into the zero gravity of the head.

Spock followed with reasonable ease and the Doctor rather awkwardly.

Their approach to the fossil was silent and eerie. The closer they got the more ancient it appeared with its pitted and discoloured bones tracing, in fragmentary fashion, the outline of a jackal-headed bat with a three metre wing span.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were less than five metres away and crowded between two red laser struts, when sudden, confused movement jolted them into self-defensive action. There was a brief, frantic

struggle, then in a wild blur of speed Kirk and McCoy found themselves flung back and out towards a laser strut where, having made abrupt contact, they stuck fast.

The two beings turned away from the squirming forms of the Captain and Doctor to gaze with strange intent upon Spock. Despite his feverish discomfort, the First Officer's mind was still coolly analytical. He clearly saw that they were from each of the species housed in the wings. One was very tall and muscular and covered in rich brown fur. His head was like a jackal's but there was nothing of the animal in his eyes. They were glittering green and acutely intelligent. His forked tail floated out behind him almost like a rudder. He conveyed the impression of great physical strength. Contrastingly, his companion seemed almost delicate. He was smaller and very slender. His wings were fully extended and their rich network of veins gave their tissue-paper thinness a reddish cast. Spock was sure this was the same creature that Mr Michhaelu had imperfectly mind melded with in the torso cavity. The being's eyes were open now. They were a bright golden yellow. Spock watched them in curious fascination.

"Spock, get out of there!" Kirk's urgent cry seemed to be coming from a long way away. Vaguely, Spock looked beyond the entrancing gold of the creature's eyes, to gaze upon the Captain, who was flailing ineffectually as he tried to free himself from the beam of laser light.

"Move, Spock, get back to the shuttle, get help!"

Something inside the First Officer snapped, returning him to full reality. He made an abortive attempt to bolt down into open space towards the exit tunnel. The great jackal-headed creature swiftly grabbed and held him immovable in a grip of incredible power. The smaller, winged being advanced on Spock as he fought feverishly to free himself. Dr McCoy was yelling something and it was tearing around inside Spock's helmet like a captive scream. Then in an instant the helmet was off and the communications link broken.

Kirk and McCoy watched in helpless, maddened frustration as Spock's helmet was cast aside to float gently away in the zero gravity. It came within grasping distance of McCoy and he grabbed it. The two beings were towing Spock upwards towards the fossil. "Jim," McCoy cried, "Spock's highly contagious to non-Humans. His mutated virus could kill these people if they're susceptible."

"Dammit, Bones, don't you think I realize that?"

Even if he hadn't been weakened by fever, Spock would have had little chance of escaping the fierce, firm grasp of his larger captor. Within moments they were up with the fossil. The delicate winged being was touching the fossil's bone fragments with one webbed hand and Spock's face with the other. The first stages of mind meld immobilised Spock as the jackal-headed being released his grip and pressed one of his furred hands to the other side of Spock's face and one to the fossil.

All three minds moved together upon the seas of an ancient alien history. There was a small green planet wrapped in tattered clouds. They moved down through its thin, oxygen-rich atmosphere to the soft gravity of its surface where forests of slender trees reached for the translucent white of the sky. Below the lacy green canopies of the forests lived the only intelligent life on this

long-ago planet. They were tall, beautiful beings, sleek with golden fur that thinned to nothing upon the three-metre span of their wings. High on their heads sharp pointed ears were pinkened by their rich blood supply. On their gentle faces their wide, elongated eyes were bright glittering greens and their long snouts concealed the straining filaments within their mouths. A family group of these creatures was circling high in the crisp air, then diving into the great mirror of a lake where, below the surface, they swam with effortless sweeps of their wings amid the clouds of microscopic plant life which they sifted through their mouths for food.

There was a timeless quality to the scene, but this was not a stagnant society. Within the forests there were cities full of delicate spires and the technology that, in making progress, causes great damage. But the end of this world was not self inflicted, nor did it come from outside aggression. The very heart of the planet, its molten centre, began to boil upwards into cataclysmic earthquakes and erupting volcanoes that gradually choked the atmosphere and waterways and fouled the food chain. Slowly but inexorably the planet began to die and the golden Questor race to seek escape and survival, but they were lost and alone in a desert among the stars. Their sun was small and its five outer planets unspeakably cold. Above them their twin moons moved in a serene and silvery silence, but they knew they could not survive on them for they were waterless, had thick atmospheres and strong gravity, and no life. In a frantic race against time the Questor scientists transported water and seeded the moons with mutations of plant and animal life capable of surviving in their warmer, heavier atmospheres. Then upon each of these brave new worlds they put half of themselves, for, through genetic engineering, they made hairless pink winged beings to populate the smaller, warmer moon with its weaker gravity and upon the larger and colder they engineered from themselves the tall, wingless, brown-furred creatures with wolfish heads almost like their own.

Then the centuries began to move into millennia and the individual species on the twin moons forgot about their desperate, dead creators. All was forgotten as these new Questors moved through a long dark twilight of barbarism. Gradually they clawed their way upwards towards civilization and learning and then the liberation of technology.

Exploring the black, beckoning space beyond them, they eventually discovered each other.

Nearly forty years later, the Questor descendants jointly mounted an expedition to the fire-racked, but calming, planet below for, despite its inhospitality, it was rich in metals and crystals and could provide the raw materials to build ships and probes for deeper space exploration. It was predestined that the inhabitants of the twin moons would ache for knowledge of their origins and of their creators for they knew, beyond scientific doubt, that they had been seeded on their moons, as had all other life.

It took a full century to build safe factories and begin mining the planet, but the genetically engineered Questor races accomplished this with a united sense of purpose and destiny.

Less than a decade later, they found the ancient fossil that confirmed for them what they already suspected. They were both genetically cut from a common ancestor. From this beginning they deduced the fate of their creators and their own prehistory. But

the Questor descendants from the twin moons were no longer content to share the same sense of purpose; they wanted to be whole, to be as they once were. Yet they could not interbreed and they could not genetically rejoin their separate selves. They needed the genetic key of the master race to accomplish this and so, when four centuries later they had achieved the technical excellence necessary to build a great space station, they did so in the form of their creators. Within it they housed the sacred, fossilised bones of their common ancestor as an act of reverence and a way of legitimising their right to refusion if and when they found their Gods, some of whom they believed had escaped the holocaust in space arks. Everything else about the space station was purely functional, even the wing chambers where both species were existing in a strange cross between meditation and hibernation. Only the two caretakers mind-melded with Spock were awake.

The Vulcan First Officer groaned as these beings expanded his knowledge by painstakingly showing him the small ships which were trailing the space station. They were for planetfall should the Questors ever find their genetic masters, but they never had. Despite countless centuries of aimless wandering, the twin moon descendants were still searching, but it was a spiritual search as well as a physical one. Patiently they waited for fate to reunite them with their Gods, hoping against hope that a precious few had escaped into the safety of open space in mighty arks.

Then, with gentle reverence, the caretakers moved into Spock's mind and, like lost children, sought knowledge of their creators, sought a sense of direction for their fruitless quest, and Spock's logical mind, with its deeply hidden emotions, confused and confounded them. They despairingly released him, breaking the mind meld like the pale coloured membrane of a bubble.

Moving away, they regarded Spock with a strange watchful sadness. The Vulcan weakly raised a hand to wipe the perspiration from his forehead and rub at his stinging eyes and the dull ache behind them.

Giving in to the inevitable, McCoy had stopped struggling against the grip of the laser light holding him fast. Awkwardly, with his free hand he trained his medical tricorder on each of the caretakers and grimly shook his head. "It's too late, Jim. It seems incredible, but they must have some genetic compatibility with Spock 'cos they've both got his bug in their systems."

"Damn," Kirk softly cursed.

McCoy asked in an equally subdued tone, "How the hell are we going to convince them to let us help them?"

The Captain thought that over with grave resolve. "I don't know, Bones, but we're going to have to, otherwise they're all at risk, even the ones in the wings."

"More than at risk, Jim; they could be facing a death sentence."

"They have no immunity?"

"My tricorder isn't conclusive, but I can't detect any, Jim."

"Damn!"

The caretakers separated. The smaller winged creature advanced on McCoy and the larger jackal-headed being moved towards Kirk. Both entities reached out and beat rhythmically at the laser strut. Suddenly, Kirk and McCoy were free and drifting in towards Spock. The caretakers hovered close, by watching.

"Nothing like closing the barn door after the horse has bolted," McCoy muttered bitterly, as he locked Spock's helmet back into place.

"Spock, can you hear me?" Kirk asked in urgent concern through the suit to suit link.

It took the Vulcan a few suspenseful moments to answer. "Yes, Jim, I am all right," but he didn't *sound* all right. His voice was breathless and feverish.

Kirk reluctantly pushed - he had to. "What was that all about, Spock?"

The Vulcan met his Captain's deeply troubled eyes. "They are questing for their master race, which they have elevated to the status of God."

McCoy stared hard as, drawing a ragged breath, Spock gloomily concluded, "They sought a sense of direction from me."

Digesting that with an uncomprehending frown, Kirk asked, "And were you able to give them a sense of direction?"

"No, Captain, I was not. Their quest is based upon faith, not upon scientific reality."

"Jim, I think they want us to leave," McCoy interjected, diverting Kirk's attention to the two caretakers, both of whom were pointing in the direction of the Vulcan shuttle waiting in the distant airlock. As they watched, the two aliens kicked off from the laser struts, dived down and disappeared into the exit tunnel.

Looking back to Spock, who was obviously very unwell, Kirk made his decision. "All right, Bones, we're running out of time so let's get Spock back to the Enterprise and tow the Pa'lyeon out of the way. We can then send medical teams in here to do what they can for these people."

"Yeah, Jim," McCoy said quietly. "That's our only option."

It took nearly an hour to get Spock, in his deteriorating condition, back to the shuttle. It took a further twenty long minutes to sail out from the airlock and get well clear of the externally invisible space station.

Back on board the Enterprise, Mr Chekov advised Acting Commander Sulu, "Sir, the artefact and its ships are moving away."

Sulu stared hard at the Vulcan shuttle returning from her mission with the stars shining all about her. He silently cursed the invisibility of the artefact, and its entourage of small spacecraft, veering away behind the shuttle. "Are you sure?"

"Aye, sir, very sure."

"Lt Uhura, please advise Captain Kirk."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr Sulu, sir," Chekov cried excitedly, "they've fully cloaked themselves."

"What, no readings at all?"

"No, none, sir."

"Belay that, Lt Uhura, I'll talk to the Captain myself." Sulu threw open a switch on his armrest. "Sulu to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"Sir, the artefact and its spacecraft have just diverted away from us and fully cloaked themselves."

Kirk sounded weary and defeated when he said, "Thank you, Mr Sulu, we've just had similar advice from the Pa'lyeon. Unfortunately, we've lost them."

Dr McCoy gave Chris Chapel a long and knowing look as she came into his office. "I've been expecting you, Chris."

Chapel sat down and brushed vaguely at a stray lock of blonde hair. "I've just come from Spock."

"And?"

Chapel looked pale and strained. "I'm not going to do my exo/psych unit on him."

McCoy nodded sagely. "That's what I figured." He reached into his desk for his brandy and a glass. He poured a stiff drink for Chapel and handed it over. "Here, you look like you could do with this."

Chapel studied the proffered brandy as if seeing it for the first time. "No thanks, Len."

McCoy insisted, "Drink," with a reassuring grin.

Chapel reluctantly accepted the brandy which she sipped and grimaced over.

"Come on, Chris, indulge an old country Doctor, drink it all."

Sighing with irritation, Chapel swallowed the rest of the brandy in two large gulps. "There - satisfied?"

"Yeah, I'm satisfied. Now tell me why you're not going ahead with the exo/psych unit on Spock."

With a troubled expression furrowing her brow and clouding her eyes, Chris Chapel said, "Well, Len, obviously there's the matter of Vulcan security, but less obviously there's the effect this whole business has had on Spock. If I extract all that, I'll be heavily censoring my work and ethically I feel that would be wrong."

"Yes, Chris, I agree."

Chapel relaxed noticeably back into her seat. "You do?"

McCoy didn't answer that, there was no need. Instead he regarded his assistant with a look that was kind, but measuring. "You mentioned the effect this has had on Spock. Tell me more about that."

Chapel's eyes were a little glazed. The alcohol also eased her voice as she responded, "He's restless to get out of isolation and back to work."

"That's predictable enough, Chris. What else?"

Chapel drew a deep breath. "I get the definite impression that he's depressed, Len."

"Me too, Chris. But of course to get depressed you have to have emotions to suppress and Spock'll never admit to that, it's not logical."

Chapel's lips set into a brief hard line of frustration. "It wasn't his fault that the Questors took off his helmet and caught his virus. Even if it wipes them all out, it wasn't his fault. It was their choice and their act; he was helpless to stop them."

"You and I know that Chris, and so does Spock at a logical level, but, at an emotional level, feelings of guilt and powerlessness are very self destructive if they're not worked through, and, of course, this business cuts to the core of the deepest conflict in Spock - his hybridness. On the one hand, his unique system made a vaccine for the Vulcans; on the other, it hosted a regeneration of the virus which infected the Questors. In spite of himself, Spock feels responsible."

Chapel acknowledged bleakly, "Yes, I can see that."

"And," added McCoy with steady blue eyes, "never knowing the true fate of the Questors is enough to haunt anyone, but don't forget that Spock mind-melded with them. That level of emotional intimacy is something you and I can't hope to comprehend, but it must make it all the harder for Spock."

The door to the Doctor's office opened. Captain Kirk stood in its entrance saying, "If I'm not interrupting anything, I'd like to talk to both of you."

McCoy waved him inside with, "Come on in, Jim, we were just discussing Spock."

Kirk sat beside Chris Chapel and gave her an attentive look. "How long till you let him out of isolation?"

Chapel glanced across at McCoy. "Another couple of days, Len?"

"Yeah, Chris, but first we'll run every test we can think of, and maybe invent some new ones, just to make sure we've finally killed that bug."

Kirk nodded, and went straight to the heart of the matter. "So the physical side of things is under control. What about the emotional side?"

With savouring irony, McCoy remarked. "Nothing gets by you, does it, Jim?"

Kirk's reply to that was sober and cryptic. "I can't afford to miss anything, Bones, you know that. It goes with the territory."

McCoy conceded, "Yes, Captain, I know that."

"So, what's going on with Spock? I've just come from him and he seems unusually quiet and, for Spock, almost listless and disinterested. Even hearing that the Pa'lyeon has returned safely to Vulcan territory didn't raise much more than a polite acknowledgement."

There was silence as McCoy and Chapel met each other's eyes and waited for their Captain to come to the point. "I'm no doctor, but Spock seems withdrawn and depressed to me."

"Us too, Jim."

"So what are you going to do about it, Bones?"

McCoy looked non-committally to Chapel. "Chris, what do you think?"

Chapel flushed a little. She did have an idea, but had wanted to sound it out on McCoy in private before it went any further.

Clearly understanding her hesitation, Kirk tried to put her at her ease with, "Off the record Chris, I'd like to hear what you have to say."

Raising her hands in a relinquishing gesture, Chapel said, "I think that although Spock doesn't realize it, he's behaving in a very Human way at the moment. I think if we go in and start trying to get him to express the emotion behind his depression that he'll bury it even deeper. So I think we should act as though we don't notice what's going on and let him work through this in his own way. I would, however, suggest that writing the official report for Starfleet on the Questor encounter will help him feel some of the emotion he's got on hold right now. Besides this, the Questor report has to be very carefully written and I believe that writing it will help Spock get a sense of perspective."

Chapel looked uncertainly from Kirk to McCoy to gauge their reaction. McCoy smiled and prompted, "Go on, Chris."

The Captain's expression was equally encouraging, so she added, "In the meantime, while we're finishing this border patrol, I suggest that Spock return to his normal duties and that writing the Questor report be treated as part of them."

Kirk thought it over carefully and sighed, "Yes, Chris, that sounds fine with me. What about you, Bones?"

McCoy nodded musingly. "Yeah, let's play it that way for now."

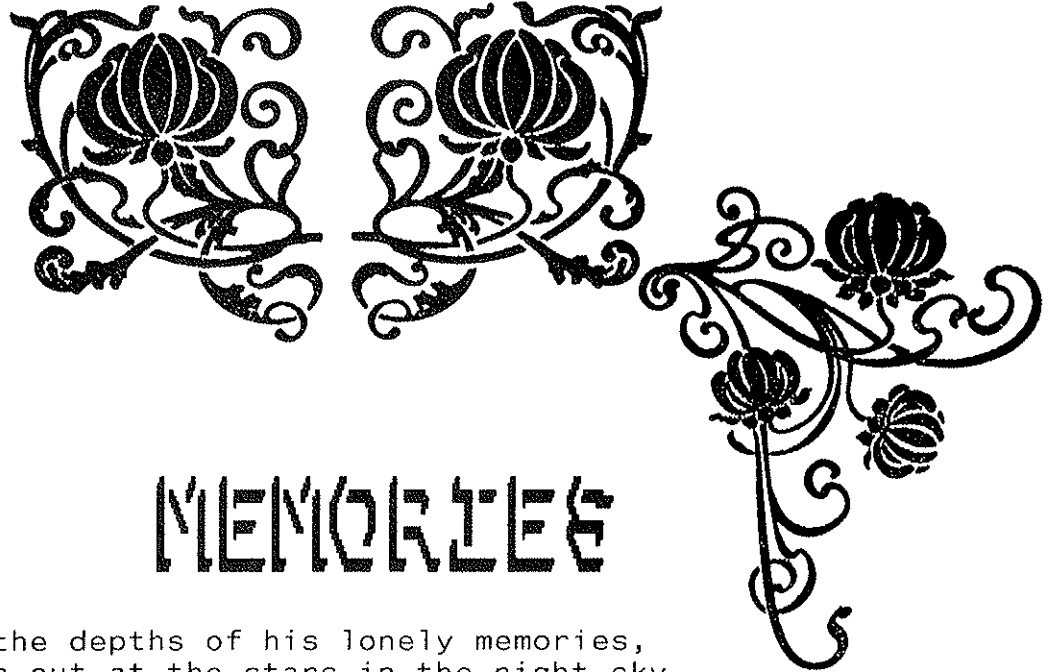
Jim Kirk pulled uncomfortably at his uniform. "Got anything to drink, Bones?"

McCoy produced his bottle of brandy and two more glasses. As he poured he said, "I feel damned sorry for Spock. Not knowing if he's destroyed two intelligent races on a crazy, untraceable quest

must be tearing him apart."

"Yeah, Bones," the Captain agreed in a heavy, tired voice. "It's given me a few sleepless nights too." He downed his drink and exhaled against its bite. "Obviously, since the Questors veered away and cloaked fully, they don't want to be found and so we'll never know what became of them. We'll never know whether they survived the virus or not." He glanced sideways at Chris Chapel. "We're all going to have to live with that."

Chapel nodded slowly. "Yes, sir, we're all going to have to live with that."



MEMORIES

Lost in the depths of his lonely memories,
He stares out at the stars in the night sky,
For the moment my existence is forgotten,
As quietly I wait and watch our love die.

Another day has passed and he has tried so hard,
To show me that he really does still care,
But I know in my heart that another calls to him,
And there is a part of him I can never share.

Soon we will part for I know he must be free,
His future lies now out in the realms of space,
And he must have the freedom he needs to fight,
To win back once more his true and rightful place.

As I leave I will take only happy memories,
Of the year we lived together as man and wife,
I hope with all my heart he finds his other half,
And he can once more resume his chosen life.

Maureen Frost

